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## Best practices for achieving first generation student success in higher education

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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

BEST PRACTICES FOR ACHIEVING FIRST GENERATION STUDENT SUCCESS IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Hillary Long Gilkeson

November, 2020

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This dissertation, written by

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under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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## DEDICATION

This labor of love is dedicated to my incredibly supportive husband and family, my amazing committee, my wonderful cohort members and coworkers, and every first generation student who felt like they didn't belong on a college campus. Know that you are seen, you are heard, and that you matter. Education is a gift that all who wish to experience it should have access to.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Write what you like; there is no other rule.” -O. Henry

It is my greatest hope that this dissertation can offer guidance and support for institutions who are inspired to further support the first generation student population. We have come a long way, but there is much work still to be done. If my research can be a small stepping stone on the path to greater service and support, I will be humbled.

I would like to thank my parents for their boundless support and encouragement over the course of my educational career. I know that I would not have reached this seemingly insurmountable goal if not for the years of guidance, wisdom, and love that they have shown me. I am appreciative beyond measure. To my amazing husband, I cannot thank you enough for your support, insight, and comic relief. You have been by my side throughout this entire process and were always there when I needed you most. You're my rock and I am eternally grateful for you. To my in-laws, thank you for your words of encouragement and your steadfast support over the course of this dissertation. Your kindness and love are sincerely appreciated. Thank you to my cohort members that became like family throughout this program and who will undoubtedly be lifelong friends and colleagues. I cherish our time together and am thankful for your presence in my life. Thank you to my committee for their guidance, support, insight, and patience. I have learned so much from you and hope to be as influential an educator as you all have been. Finally thank you to my friends and coworkers who have traversed this journey with me and encouraged me along the way. I am grateful for the support. I thank God every day for the blessing of being a part of this program and I am very humbled to have reached this achievement.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study seeks to elucidate the best practices for achieving first generation student success within the realm of higher education. First generation students experience challenges in obtaining student success at a higher rate than their multi-generational peers who possess larger reserves of social capital regarding higher education. A review of the literature identified obstacles to and methods to achieve student success. The review progresses with discussion surrounding how to transition students to college so that they achieve student success from the time of matriculation. Finally, the review identifies the ways in which first generation students may require additional support and resources to be successful and suggests ways in which social capital can be gained by this population in order to achieve student success. Through semi-structured interviews with higher education faculty and staff who are experts in the field of first generation student success data was gathered and coded to reveal larger themes that are representative of the best practices for achieving student success for the first generation student population.

**Keywords:** First generation, student success, social capital

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background/Historical Context**

Imagine being a newly admitted college student stepping on to campus for the first time. The atmosphere is full of anticipation, expectation, and curiosity. The experience can be challenging for any student. Next, imagine being a newly admitted first generation college student with little prior knowledge of the college experience and no one to serve as a guide through this unfamiliar landscape. What may prove challenging for multi-generational students can become daunting for first generation students resulting in unforeseen obstacles in their first months on campus and beyond (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Research has shown that students whose parents did not attend college are not as prepared for the transition and have difficulty acclimating (Terenzini et al., 1996). Lacking the social capital necessary to navigate a college campus, first generation students struggle to make a successful transition into higher education.

It is estimated that 50% of college students identify as first generation while 30% of the college freshmen population is considered first generation (First Generation Foundation, n.d.). A further breakdown has estimated that while only 25% of Caucasian and Asian-American students are first generation, 41% of first generation students are African-American and 61% are Latino (Skomsvold, 2014).

First generation students often tend to be older than their multi-generational counterparts with the average median age being 24 in contrast to the median age of 21 for students whose parents possessed a bachelor's degree (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). 34% of first generation students were over the age of 30, double the average of 17% for multi-generational students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). First generation students

are also more likely to be supporting dependents during their college career. While only 45% of multi-generational students were supporting dependents, that number rose to 60% for first generation students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018).

While continuing education students tend to plan on attending college from childhood, first generation students are more shortsighted in their appraisal of post high school life (Lucas, 2001). Furthermore, even outfitted with a small amount of information regarding matriculation in college, first generation students may be missing key components of how to transition successfully and therefore will be unprepared and unsure of their future in higher education (Lucas, 2001). First generation students are less detailed in their college plans than their peers who have specific schools they wish to attend and areas of study they have already pinpointed (Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2017). Students who are first generation are more likely to make generalizable plans about the possibility of attending college with little forethought as to the type of institution they wish to attend and what resources it will take to get them there (Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2017). Moreover, their desire to attend college stems from a hope to avoid the challenges their families have endured by not attending college and also to inspire their siblings to further their education as well (Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2017).

First generation students appear more drawn to two-year higher education institutions than four-year institutions. It is estimated that 48% of first-generation students matriculated at two-year schools in contrast to the 32% of multi-generational students who attended these institutions (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). However, a recent Pell Institute study suggested that first-generation students who begin their college educations at four-year institutions are seven times more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree than first generation students who attend two-year institutions (The Pell Institute, 2016). Unfortunately, only 25% of

first generation students decided to matriculate at a four-year institution (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). Interestingly, first generation students are less likely to attend non-profit school than multi-generational students. Almost 50% of the student population at for-profit institutions is comprised of first generation students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018).

Since first generation students tend to be older than their counterparts and supporting dependents, this population is drawn to the flexibility of attending college part-time. Nearly 50% of first-generation students attend college on a part-time basis in contrast to their multi-generational peers with only 38% of that population attending part-time (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). In conjunction with the flexibility of part-time coursework, first generation students also participate in distance learning more often than their counterparts (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). These scheduling options, while amenable to students with jobs and dependents, also lead to longer periods of time enrolled at higher education institutions and lower four-year graduation rates. While 55% of multi-generational students will obtain a bachelor's degree within six years of entering college, a staggeringly low 11% of low-income, first generation students will meet the same goal (The Pell Institute, 2016).

First generation students are also more likely to live off-campus compared to their peers. Working more hours and living off campus significantly contribute to first generation student involvement in extracurricular activities such as clubs, sports, and volunteer work (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). This lack of involvement can also impact peer relationships as first generation students often do not interact as prevalently with their continuing generation peers outside of the classroom (Pascarella et al., 2004).



From the time they are first enrolled in college first generation students face a myriad of obstacles. Many first generation students experience gaps in their readiness for college resulting in the need for more remedial coursework and placing them at a higher risk of academic failure. 36% of first generation students noted that they were enrolled in remedial coursework upon enrolling in college (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). Participation in these remedial courses impedes students from progressing forward at the anticipated pace for a four-year graduation timeline.

Larger class sizes and a higher ratio of students to faculty can result in first generation student anxiety and a lack of connection between students and their professors (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). First generation students describe a lower number of interactions with other students in class, as well as their professors in comparison to continuing education students (Pascarella et al., 2004). Beattie and Thiele (2016) suggest that first generation students may struggle with the negative impact of large class sizes more than their peers due to challenges that they face as a marginalized population and that these obstacles could impede their relationships and interactions with faculty and classmates. Though first generation college students are negatively impacted by large class sizes and therefore have fewer connections with their professors and peers, they are the population that would receive the most positive impact from discussing course readings and assignments, as well as having career related conversations (Pascarella et al., 2004).

First generation students may also be struggling financially when enrolling in higher education due to lower median household incomes and a higher amount of unmet financial need than their multi-generational counterparts. While the median family income for first-generation students was \$37, 565, that amount was over double for multi-generational students at \$99, 635 (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). Furthermore, The Pell Institute reported that the

average amount of financial need before loans for low-income, first generation students was climbing to \$6,000, nearly half of their estimated median annual income which required them to delve deeper into debt and work more to offset the cost of attendance (The Pell Institute, 2016). This in turn had a negative impact on graduation rates for first generation students. Over a quarter of first-generation students are residing in households where the median annual income is \$20,000 or below (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). To complicate matters further, nearly half of first generation students who borrowed money for their education were also matriculated at higher education institutions with the highest default rates (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). First generation students are therefore struggling to pay for their education and undertaking high amounts of debt in order to enroll, even at the risk of defaulting on their loans.

The socioeconomic and academic obstacles that are facing first generation students are numerous and the social norms understood by many of their multi-generational peers are unfamiliar and often confusing to the first generation population. Without the social capital to navigate this foreign landscape first generation students are lacking the tools for a successful transition to higher education. Furthermore, the absence of certain forms of social capital is paramount to exclusion for first generation students (Daly & Silver, 2008). A shift in the treatment and understanding of first generation students is necessary.

### **Statement of the Problem**

While first generation students comprise a considerable portion of the college student population, little is being done to ease their transition into higher education. College is not a unilateral experience and first generation students often struggle to acclimate to an environment that is filled with continuing generation peers who already have an understanding of how to

navigate the campus socially, academically, and financially. This lack of social capital can be challenging for first generation students while their peers appear to understand the environment more easily. Though an expanding number of higher education institutions see a necessity for first generation student focused services, there is a gap in knowledge as to how the services should be structured and in what ways they will be most effective in assisting first generation students (Whitley, Benson, & Wesaw, 2018). While more programs are being generated at college campuses across the United States, few institutions are tracking the long-term outcomes of first generation students participating in these programs (Whitley et al., 2018). Furthermore, the programs targeting first generation students do not have the substance necessary to make a fruitful impact on the population (Whitley et al., 2018). Programs directed at this population need to identify specific goals and learning objectives to ensure that they are utilizing student's time and resources most effectively.

First generation student intersectionality is another aspect of the population that often does not receive the proper focus. Higher education institutions must examine how other ways in which students identify themselves may impact their first generation student status (Whitley et al., 2018). These populations, known as first-gen plus identifies students who may belong to other populations as well (Whitley et al., 2018). Institutions must make an effort to look at first generation student identities within the larger picture. When institutions make the assumption that first generation students are all similar, especially when considering them to be minorities and/or low-income students, those students who do not fit into this identity find themselves adrift in finding a program that they can identify with or that does not feel excluding (Whitley et al., 2018). Ethnicity particularly serves both to bring some groups together in a space where they can share their identities, but it can also be unintentionally exclusionary of others (Birani &

Lehmann, 2013). Programs targeted at first generation students must understand and cater to the often complicated intersectionality that comes with being a student that falls into multiple sub-genres of identity.

The campus location of first generation student programs is also an area of concern. Many institutions choose to house their programs under the umbrella of departments such as financial aid or multicultural student centers hoping to attract first generation students that fall into sub-populations of low-income or minority students (Whitley et al., 2018). However, if a first generation student does not interact with those departments they may be unaware of the first generation student services that these offices house, unfairly alienating other first generation students who may be interested in the resources offered (Whitley et al., 2018).

Research has also suggested a shift in the way we view first generation students who are attempting to balance school, work, and family life. Institutions tend to equate participation on campus with a student's social integration in the community (Daly & Silver, 2008). However, schools should be applauding these students for their multi-tasking skills instead of chastising them for their absence of extracurricular activities (Whitley et al., 2018).

While a demand for access and increased universality appear to be common themes for first generation student programs, there are dissenting voices to these concepts. In response to a suggestion that higher education institutions reevaluate their vocabulary and verbiage to make confusing terminology clearer for first generation students, Durden argues that this request would only serve to further marginalize the population (Durden, 2019). The assumption that first generation students are incapable of adapting to a new environment and will fail to learn a new vocabulary is detrimental to their overall student profile and expectation for success (Durden, 2019). A solution to this issue could come in the form of ceasing assumptions regarding first

generation students and instead listening to what this population needs and utilizing the skills sets that they already possess to bring about impactful change (Durden, 2019).

Understanding the needs and gaps in knowledge for first generation students is paramount for a successful transition to higher education. While institutions offer a wealth of resources and information, as well as opportunities to build social capital, these tools are often not packaged in a way that is accessible or desirable to first generation students. Colleges must ascertain the best methods for outfitting first generation students with the social capital needed to make their transitions as efficient and productive as possible.

### **Purpose Statement**

It is necessary to identify the areas in which the most prominent gaps in knowledge are present for first generation students. Specifically, how first generation students can bolster their social capital to build networks of knowledge and resources that will prove beneficial to them during their transition to college and improve their student success. As new classes of first generation students matriculate onto college campuses they require programs targeting their specific needs. While there are programs that have proven to engage first generation students at institutions across the United States it is still unclear what makes these services successful. In order to ascertain these strategies, as well as areas for growth, a grounded theory study, understood as a meticulous qualitative research methodology which inductively exposes the emanation of conceptual categories, (Creswell & Poth, 2018) will be conducted. The study will determine where and how first generation student success strategies can be improved to better serve the population's student success. The study will also explore the challenges faced by institutions attempting to aid this population in their transition.

In order to better understand this issue, experts within the realm of higher education will be interviewed. These experts will be individuals who have overseen a variety of programs targeted at first generation students and have experienced success in engaging first generation students during their transition into college.

A purposeful sampling of participants will be chosen from higher education institutions in the United States. Participants will be identified and selected using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. The participant group will be referred to as first generation student experts.

As experts in the field of first generation student programming, qualities will be examined that have contributed to first generation student success, challenges in engaging the population, and how they measure success developing social capital for first generation students.

15 volunteers will be asked to participate in this research study. Permission to use their information will be obtained using an informed consent process. Pseudonyms will be used for participant names, as well as the names of the affiliated universities.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions (RQ) were addressed in this study.

RQ1 - What strategies are used by higher education institutions to increase first generation student success?

RQ2 - What challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success?

RQ3 - How do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success?

RQ4 - What recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students?

### **Significance of the Study**

The study of outfitting first generation students with the social capital to make a successful transition into higher education can be construed as a learning paradigm for institutions seeking to increase their first generation student success, engagement, and retention. The goal of the study is to develop success strategies targeted at aiding first generation students in developing social capital and therefore build a network which provides the support and resources necessary for successful acclimation to college. The study will also serve as a framework for higher education institutions seeking to implement programs targeting first generation student success. First generation students participating in these programs will have an opportunity to experience higher levels of engagement in the classroom, as well as on campus. Regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or personal situations first generation students can find a sense of belonging on campus that is currently lacking in the higher education landscape. This study seeks to alleviate that inadequacy and usher in an environment of inclusion and engagement.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

It is assumed that the participants in the study will be honest and truthful in their responses to the questions posed to them. The assumption exists that the data collected from the participants will be from the participant's observations and experiences regarding the population of first generation college students. Using an axiological philosophical assumption, the researcher will incorporate their personal interpretation along with the interpretations of the participants involved while conceding the "value-laden" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21) content of the research. It is also assumed that participant biases will be present relationally to their role

within the study context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study will not ultimately assume or claim generalizability to the United States population as an assumption.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study will utilize a qualitative approach to better understand the challenges faced by first generation students and the success strategies implemented to increase social capital and provide a more seamless transition for the population. The study will also employ a transformative framework with the goal of instigating action and reform in assisting first generation students, an often marginalized population. This framework suggests that knowledge is not neutral and it further showcases social relationships and power within the realm of society (Mertens, 2003). The larger purpose of compiling and constructing this knowledge base aligns with the goal of assisting others in improving society (Mertens, 2003). The researcher chose this qualitative, transformative approach as it supported the focus of the study on a need for change in the interactions of first generation students in higher education.

A limitation of the study is the given scope of the number of participants within the study. A larger sample size could prove more representational of the larger population engaging in programs designed for first generation students. In selecting participants for the study the researcher is limited by individuals who elect to participate in the study. Though the researcher will initiate contact and request an interview, the selected individuals may choose not to participate in the study or may feel uncomfortable answering the interview questions posed to them. Of the individuals who do choose to participate in the study, the researcher may not receive the geographic scope of participants across the United States that would offer a more representational sample. Furthermore, the amount of time given to complete the data collection could serve as a limitation. While some individuals may desire to participate in the study, they



may not be available for interview during the time period allotted for data collection. Results could also be influenced by the operation of society within the data collection timeframe. Factors such as social trends or issues within higher education could influence participant responses.

The format in which the interviewing of participants takes place could also prove to be a limitation of the study. While some participants may be comfortable with face to face interviews and have the time and availability for this format, other participants may be unable or unwilling to be interviewed in this manner. In this case, phone or video-conferencing style interviews may have to be employed in order to complete the interviews. Finally, another limitation could be the replicability of the study for future researchers.

### **Definition of Terms**

**First generation college students.** First generation students are defined within this study as those students whose parents did not attain a degree from a college or university (London, 1989; Terenzini et al., 1996).

**Student engagement.** Student engagement is defined as the amount of interest, dedication, and passion that students exhibit when they are being taught something new or are in the process of learning (Great Schools Partnership, 2016). This can further be parlayed into a student's level of motivation to continue their learning and progress further in their teachings (Great Schools Partnership, 2016). However, beyond the classroom student engagement may also be defined as the various ways that school faculty, staff, and administrators can get students involved with the school's community, the implementation and design of new programs, and the collaboration regarding large-scale decisions (Great Schools Partnership, 2016).

**Student success.** Student success at a minimum begins with the matriculation of students on a college campus, their enrollment in courses, their retention in those courses, and their

ultimate graduation with a degree from the institution (Parnell, 2018). Beyond this basic definition is a consideration for students who are aware of how and when to adapt or change their environment, as well as students who are able to identify their own needs and the needs of others and balance them in such a way as to benefit themselves and the larger community (Parnell, 2018). Furthermore, successful students are aware of shared and individual resources and understand how to responsibly manage them (Parnell, 2018). Success for students is also acknowledged as student's recognition of their own capabilities and talents while understanding how to utilize them to positively affect change in the larger community (Parnell, 2018).

**Social capital.** Pierre Bourdieu, largely considered to be the Father of social capital, in his article within Richardson's *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (1986), defined the term as

the aggregate of the actual and potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit in the various senses of the word. (p. 248)

**Summer bridge program.** Summer bridge programs take place in the summer between the end of high school and the beginning of a freshman student's entry to college (Institute of Education Sciences, 2016). Typically the programs are defined as lessons that focus on preparing students for a successful transition into college by focusing on enhancing their social and academic skill sets (Institute of Education Sciences, 2016). Bridge programs can offer various resources depending on the population that the program is focusing on, but they will generally

cover topics ranging from an introduction to campus life to time management skills and preparatory coursework before the school year begins (Institute of Education Sciences, 2016).

## **Chapter 1 Summary**

This study seeks to understand the challenges and success strategies that higher education institutions utilize when transitioning first generation students on to campus. Though first generation students comprise one third of the college student population they have different needs and experience different obstacles than their multi-generational classmates. This chapter discussed some of the hurdles first generation students face such as socioeconomic status, caring for dependents, gaps in college readiness, and a lack of connections with peers, faculty, and staff. Chapter 1 also highlights the need to alleviate as many of these challenges as is feasible to ease first generation students' transitions to college. The significance of the study, as well as the transformative theoretical framework were described. Furthermore, operational definitions were offered for pertinent terminology that will appear frequently throughout the study. Assumptions and limitations of the study have also been noted.

Chapter 2 offers a review of the relevant literature discussing college success, varying strategies for college success, social capital as it pertains to college success, transitioning strategies for first generation students, and services directed at first generation students. Chapter 3 will detail the methodology of the study including the research design and instrumentation. The chapter will also elaborate upon the proposed sampling, as well as the process of data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 will report the findings collected from the experts on first generation students while the fifth and final chapter will summarize the findings and examine the conclusions drawn from the data. Recommendations for further research will also be offered.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The focus of this literature review is to better understand student success as it pertains to the college student population and then, more narrowly, as it pertains to first generation college students. This chapter will highlight the larger definition of college success and the expectations that are aligned with that definition. Strategies for college success will be explored along with varying strategies across higher education including providing and cultivating social capital. This chapter will also introduce success strategies for transitioning students to college and will further investigate specific strategies for acclimating first generation students. The review will conclude with a more narrow focus on specific strategies and programs aimed at first generation student success strategies as the population transitions to higher education.

The literature review will be outlined by dividing the chapter into sections dealing with each topic of consideration beginning with defining college success in its broader sense. This section will focus on success for college students within the general population. The next section will detail different strategies for student success including the introduction of the concept of social capital. The discussion on social capital will illuminate how a lack of social capital can impede student success due to gaps in knowledge and experience. The next section will highlight transitioning strategies for student success in the larger scope of higher education, but will begin to narrow on strategies for transitioning first generation students into higher education. The final sections of the literature review will explore specific strategies for student success aimed at the first generation student population including resources and programs designed to aid first generation students in a successful college experience.

## College Student Success

The topic of student success has been studied and discussed for decades by researchers seeking to understand what constitutes this nebulous terminology (Adelman, 2004; Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012; Caruth, 2018; College Board, 2010; Conley, 2007; Duggan, 2002; Emme, 1942; K. P. Gonzalez, 2009; Hutchison, 2017; Karp, Kalamkarian, Klempin, & Fletcher, 2016; Kim, Newton, Downey, & Benton, 2010; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018; Strayhorn, 2015). What classifies as a successful student can depend upon varying factors and also upon who is defining the term. We can find definitions for the concept of student success ranging back to the 19th century. Craven noted the four keys to student success as having a concentrated mind, an ability to retain information through memory, a will to succeed in the classroom, and the determination to keep an objective in clear sight (1892). All of these keys must be in use for a student to elicit success in their studies, though it is often difficult for students to maintain all four of these components at once (Craven, 1892). Though Craven's insights are nearly 130 years old, they are still echoed in the literature of today along with an even more broad understanding of what it means for a student to be successful not only academically, but also socially.

**Basis of student success.** A 2008 study conducted by the American College Testing Program, or ACT, highlights important data informing what we know about student success at higher education institutions. The study examines multiple factors in determining student success and how to achieve it beginning with college recruitment and enrollment, as well as college readiness (ACT Inc., 2008). For example, students who choose a specific major are more likely to be successful if they enroll in a college that caters to their particular major, as well as if the program has an outstanding reputation (ACT Inc., 2008). Furthermore, the ACT research showed

that students who were considered college ready (i.e. had taken high level and honors coursework in high school) and those students who participated in college readiness programs were more likely to enroll and be successful in college (ACT Inc., 2008). In conjunction with college readiness and success, students who are college ready are much less likely to need participation in remedial coursework once they arrive on campus and will be academically balanced enough to take on mainstream freshman year courses (ACT Inc., 2008; Robbins et al., 2006). Students who possess higher standardized test scores, who have taken elevated coursework in high school, and who are highly motivated will perform more successfully in first-year coursework and can expect a higher gpa overall than their classmates who did not have these advantages (ACT Inc., 2008; Noble & Radunzel, 2007; Robbins et al., 2006). The study also indicated that students who were committed to furthering their education and who were self-disciplined academically, as well as engaging socially on campus had a higher rate of retention than students who did not exhibit these traits and were therefore more successful in their higher education journeys (ACT Inc., 2008).

**Academic indicators and contributors to student success.** Determining student success and a student's ability for success can be difficult, but there are certain indicators that help contribute to assessing these factors. A student's level of schooling and course rigor can greatly predict a student's ability to succeed in college (College Board, 2010). A student's high school grade point average, standardized test scores, and level of rigor in coursework should be examined to determine a student's readiness for college as higher achievement in these areas is a good predictor of future college success for students (College Board, 2010; Kim et al., 2010). In conjunction with engaging in academically rigorous courses, students who participated in

Advanced Placement courses and took the associated tests for the courses to receive college credit, possessed a higher chance of success at the college level (College Board, 2010).

While college retention rates and graduation rates are more broad scopes of student success there are many contributing factors to the success of college students (Millea, Wills, Elder, & Molina, 2018). Large class sizes, especially experienced by freshman college students attempting to complete their general education requirements, are a hindrance to the success of college students (Millea et al., 2018). Small class sizes however offer a better environment for student success and are encouraged by researchers studying the topic (Beattie, & Thiele, 2016; Millea et al., 2018). Student success can also hinge on an institution's ability to understand its students' financial status and operate accordingly (Millea et al., 2018). The awarding of grants and merit based scholarships are large contributors to student success, particularly those who are struggling financially (Millea et al., 2018).

Beyond class size and financial factors, a student's own commitment to academic work outside the classroom is incredibly important to student success (Andreas, 2018; Nwaokoro, 2010). The ability to study independently of professorial instruction is a key factor in assessing a student's likelihood of success in college. Access to relevant technology and the knowledge of how to utilize it to their advantage can be another contributor to college student success (Andreas, 2018; Lovano McCann, 2017; Nwaokoro, 2010). Technology can be used to enhance study skills and engage more fully with the coursework. Increased access to technology, along with tutorials on how to integrate it into the educational experience can have a positive impact on student success (Nwaokoro, 2010).

Student success is also impacted by students who are able to self-regulate their learning (Fitch, Marshall, & McCarthy, 2012; Hoops & Artrip, 2016). Self-regulated learning occurs

outside the boundaries of parental and instructor regulations on the structure of learning and takes place at the student's pace (Hoops & Artrip, 2016). Students take learning into their own hands and explore on their own terms. While some students are naturally self-regulated learners, others need assistance to achieve this ability. Students in need of cultivating their self-regulated learning are often enrolled in courses aimed at college success (Hoops & Artrip, 2016; Wolters & Hoops, 2015). These courses target college student success by increasing self-regulated learning skills which can positively impact student performance (Hoops & Artrip, 2016). Self-regulated learning allows students to monitor their progress in their coursework, evaluate areas of strength and growth, and plan around one's learning (Hoops & Artrip, 2016).

**Non-academic indicators and contributors of student success.** Non-academic traits can also be significant contributors to student success. These factors can have an impact on academic performance, but cannot take the place of college readiness (ACT Inc., 2007). Internal psychological and psychosocial traits such as a commitment to education and self-discipline, self-confidence, and the ability to regulate emotions can have a tremendous impact on the success or failure of a college student (ACT Inc., 2007). Students should attempt to maintain attention to their studies and academic success even in the midst of personal or emotional turbulence. Distractions to academic success caused by a student's inability to emotionally regulate themselves can be detrimental to their overall success. Conversely, students who regulate their emotions may also be better equipped to regulate their own learning in such a way that is fruitful and beneficial for their student success.

Success can also be influenced negatively or positively by a student's family. A family's opinion of education and their involvement in a student's activities inside and outside of the classroom can greatly impact a student's feelings toward education therefore affecting their



success or lack thereof (ACT Inc., 2007). Looking toward life after college and career planning is another factor impacting student success (ACT Inc., 2007). Successful students align their college experience with what they wish to do post-graduation which encourages a harmony between what a student is interested in and their career goals (ACT Inc., 2007).

Student centrality is a mindset of identifying as a college student and considering this aspect of one's life to be an identifying factor for one's self. This identity can be a powerful tool in the realm of student success. Student centrality encourages student persistence, involvement with the college, and commitment to higher education (Bowman & Felix, 2017). Those who see themselves as students desire to achieve as students when it is considered a central part of their identity. Students who possess high levels of student identity centrality are also more likely to overcome obstacles that would deter others with lower levels of student centrality. Students with lower levels of student centrality would be less likely to persist to graduation (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Bowman & Felix, 2017; Hurtado, Cuellar, & Guillermo-Wann, 2011). Financial or family challenges that often cause students to drop out of college do not have the same effect on students with high student identity centrality because being a student is a core part of who they are (Bowman & Felix, 2017). Successful students harbor student identity centralities as they persist through challenges and ultimately graduate from college.

Circumstantial factors can also contribute to and impact their student success. The ethnicity of a student along with their location in a geographic region and socioeconomic status can have an effect on success, as well as if they are a student that identifies as first generation (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Kim et al., 2010). The type of institution that a student attends is also a large factor in whether a student will be successful on campus. Students who find engagement and community within the campus, as well as

identifying with the interests and values of the institution are more likely to be successful (Kim et al., 2010). Factors such as a student's attitude can largely impact their success along with other internal traits like self-efficacy, confidence, decision making skills, critical thinking skills, and values (Kim et al., 2010). These traits and skills can enhance a student's academic success and help them engage more deeply with the content they are exploring. Health and well-being can also impact a student's success as they navigate the taxing landscape of higher education and balance many competing consumers of time and energy including studying and extracurricular activities (Emme, 1942; Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994; Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007).

Students often need a support system in order to be successful in college. While family members and friends can be helpful, student success can be greatly improved by the introduction of a mentor (Collier, 2017; Nwaokoro, 2010). Both hierarchical mentoring and peer mentoring can be useful in increasing student success academically as well as socially (Collier, 2017). Students who seek out mentors tend to earn more course credits and have higher grade point averages, while also persisting in college leading to higher retention rates (Collier, 2017). Furthermore, mentorship aids in student acclimation to campus which allows students to feel more comfortable in an unfamiliar environment causing them to be more successful when they are newly introduced to campus (Collier, 2017; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Challenges facing student success.** There are many challenges and obstacles that can impede a college student's success along their educational journey. One such obstacle is where the responsibility of student engagement lay which is a question yet to be answered by current research (Caruth, 2018). Higher education institutions do not always assess if they are meeting the learning needs of their students which could also impede student success (Caruth, 2018). If

students are not presented with the tools that they need to succeed then they will find it difficult to persist in the college environment. Institutions must also be mindful of teaching effectiveness of faculty to ensure that students are receiving the most efficient and effective methods of instruction (Caruth, 2018). Colleges must assess which methods of teaching achieve the best results and the most effective faculty to employ these methods (Caruth, 2018).

Placing far too much emphasis on a student's standardized testing scores can negatively impact student success (Barhoum, 2018). Institutions that make assumptions about student ability based solely on standardized test scores do not receive a full picture of a student's aptitude and capabilities in the classroom (Barhoum, 2018). Multiple measures should be taken into consideration when placing students in coursework, but other methods are rarely employed even though they offer a clearer image of how successful a student will be (Barhoum, 2018; Scott-Clayton, 2012). Furthermore, if underprepared students matriculate on campus, colleges and universities must ensure that this population is receiving every possible resource in order to be successful, including mandatory tutoring and visits to the writing center, as well as employing smaller class sizes as these all encourage student success while the reciprocal leads to student demise (Barhoum, 2018; Nwaokoro, 2010).

While student retention can lead to student success since the goal is to keep students enrolled in college, it can also prove detrimental (Strayhorn, 2015). Many institutions make retention a higher priority than graduating students and therefore strive to keep students on campus rather than looking toward their future graduation (Strayhorn, 2015). In order to help students achieve a degree and graduate, they often need support. A very under-utilized support system is a student's college advisor, a guide that can help students set a path for success (Nwaokoro, 2010; Strayhorn, 2015). Advisors can serve as cultural navigators that can aid

students in blazing a trail through the often confusing culture that is higher education (Strayhorn, 2015). Advisors can serve as translators for educational vernacular, coaches through difficult decisions and coursework, guides during periods of confusion and uncertainty, and even give advice as to internship opportunities (Nwaokoro, 2010; Strayhorn, 2015). Students who do not utilize their academic advisors and academic advisors who are not serving their students can have a large impact on student success (Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2007; Strayhorn, 2015). Advisors can aid students in understanding what they need to do to be successful on campus, as well as finding a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar landscape (Strayhorn, 2015).

Another challenge facing student success is the traditional model of teacher-centered instruction in the classroom in which an instructor stands at the front of the classroom and lectures to students seated in rows (Burke & Ray, 2008; Kaufka, 2010; Lightweis, 2013; Painter, 2009). Recent research has called for a more student centered approach that engages students more deeply known as differentiated instruction (Lightweis, 2013; McFarlane, 2010; Painter, 2009). Differentiated instruction involves placing students in groups based assessment outcomes and having students use various methods to present the knowledge they have accrued (Lightweis, 2013). This type of instruction requires challenging assignments with continued testing of skill sets, as well as fluid and changing groupings of students dependent upon performance (Ernst & Ernst, 2005; Lightweis, 2013). With an increasingly diverse student population and students who learn in vastly different ways, an approach such as differentiated instruction that allows for creativity and activities that interest students is far more supportive of student success than the traditional teacher centered method of instruction that is still so prevalent on college campuses today (Lightweis, 2013).

A lack of communication on campus regarding what resources students have to utilize can be detrimental to student success (Hagedorn et al., 2007). If students are unaware of what is available to them they will not use services that could potentially aid them in their success. For example, student services offices or student employment offices could offer information about job placements, internships, and other career planning services that would aid students in finding useful career opportunities (Hagedorn et al., 2007). Similarly, communication about where to go for help or who to speak to about certain problems can be a large challenge for student success (Hagedorn et al., 2007). When presented with a question or problem that needs rectified, students should easily be able to discern where to go and who to ask for help, but this is often not the case and can result in student frustration and lack of follow through which in turn impacts student success (Hagedorn et al., 2007). Especially in regard to faculty, adjunct faculty that are only present on campus part time and who do not have regular office hours present a number of challenges for student success (Hagedorn et al., 2007). Often these faculty members do not even have an office space to call their own and do not have stable and frequent office hours for students seeking guidance to receive help (Hagedorn et al., 2007). If students feel that they cannot reach out to their professors, or worse, their professors are unresponsive to requests for extra help outside of class, student success suffers (Hagedorn et al., 2007).

Now that contributors and indicators of student success, as well as challenges faced by student success have been examined, the next section will explore strategies employed by higher education institutions aimed at increasing student success.

## Strategies for Student Success

The following section will detail different types of strategies for student success at higher education institutions. Strategies such as improving student learning, faculty/student interaction, community engagement, and increasing social capital will be discussed.

**Building student success through higher education affordability.** Being able to afford college is an important factor for students in deciding where to attend college and whether to persist until graduation. Many students choose to go to community colleges before transferring to four-year institutions simply because it is more cost efficient to do so (Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2002). Many community colleges offer financial assistance in the form of textbook waivers and fee waivers, as well as low tuition costs for students who are experiencing financial difficulty (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Four-year institutions are also attempting to help students who are facing insurmountable challenges due to rising attendance costs. For example, Georgia State University offers grants for students who would be unable to continue their studies for lack of funding (Moore, Schrager, & Bracco, 2017). These lower cost options, grants, and waivers make college accessible for students who may find it challenging to pay for higher education. Furthermore, higher education needs a re-evaluation of how financial aid is distributed (Potter, 2017). Particularly for students struggling financially there is a need for a reorganization of institutional, state, and federal financial aid practices in order to focus more heavily on need based financial aid and scholarships (Potter, 2017). A shift in how institutions distribute aid and an examination of the overall cost of college attendance, particularly for low-income students or students who have financial challenges is paramount to helping these students achieve success in higher education.

**Building student success through teaching strategies and improving student learning.** Much of student success begins in the classroom and how students adapt to learning. Many institutions are implementing new methods of teaching and instruction to make sure that the academic needs of students are met. However this shift requires many steps, the first of which being recognizing a need for and demanding change (The Aspen Institute, 2013). Faculty and staff must realize that the status quo is no longer an acceptable way of life and push for change (The Aspen Institute, 2013). In many cases it may be that students are not performing well on proficiency exams or not absorbing the content in the classroom and exhibiting poor test scores, but behaviors such as these can indicate that a change must be made in order to increase student learning (The Aspen Institute, 2013). Once the need for change has been recognized, research suggests constructing a team to help instigate the modifications and plan for a future of replicable changes (The Aspen Institute, 2013). After a team has been assembled it is important to implement a model for implementation so that the changes that have been decided upon can be put into motion across the campus and proceed into a permanent and/or long-term plan (The Aspen Institute, 2013). For example, submitting new criteria for attaining tenure based off of student learning outcomes and teaching performance or using low graduation rates to motivate faculty to change their classroom models (The Aspen Institute, 2013). Institutions that promote change must also be able to reflect on the impact of the change and evaluate ways to continue the improvements in the future (The Aspen Institute, 2013).

The Center for Community College Student Engagement or CCCSE recommends a three-pronged approach in their strategies for student success including planning, initiating, and sustaining success at different avenues (2012). Planning for success implements assessing students and placing them in appropriate level coursework, as well as participating in academic

goal setting and constructing plans for their academic future (CCCSE, 2012). The Center also encourages student participation in learning communities and student success courses to further their skill sets, followed by sustaining techniques that include tutoring and supplemental instruction paired with experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom (2012).

Inside of the classroom shifting from teacher-centered models of instruction to student-centered models like differentiated instruction is a valuable teaching strategy to improve student learning and overall student success (Lightweis, 2013). While faculty must be prepared to be flexible in their instruction and rapidly change methods to accommodate all types of learners, this type of instruction showcases what students have learned in ways that are creative and novel (Lightweis, 2013). Differentiated instruction can be useful for students at all levels of experience and aptitude as it can be molded to fit students who are struggling and need developmental support, as well as students who are excelling, but may be interested in honing their knowledge (Lightweis, 2013; Pham, 2012). In contrast to the traditional model of teaching in which a professor lectures at the front of the classroom to rows of students sitting in desks, differentiated instruction relies on student engagement and group work to enhance learning outcomes for students (Lightweis, 2013).

In another study published by the Center for Community College Student Engagement an increase in classroom engagement through raising expectations and encouraging active participation and engagement with the course material is recommended for student success (CCCSE, 2010). The study also notes the importance of students engaging in deep learning that allows them to understand material in a more broad sense and apply it to everyday life which is vitally different from the typical rote memorization that is required of college students (CCCSE, 2010). Deep learning encourages connections with other coursework and application in critical



thinking, traits that are key to student success (CCCSE, 2010). To further promote deep learning instructors should be prepared to offer timely feedback regarding areas of growth for students along with acknowledging areas in which the student is showing strength to encourage success and indicate where a student may need to spend more time (CCCSE, 2010). It is also recommended that faculty continuously engage in professional development opportunities to grow their skills and build efficient teaching strategies that promote student success (CCCSE, 2010).

While improving student learning inside the classroom is important, it is necessary for the reach to extend further with institutions encouraging collaboration across departments and campus offices with the idea of constructing an environment with a united vision for the institution and goals to achieve student success (Kezar, 2003). Building an institution with faculty and staff that are enthusiastic about the work they do and constructing partnerships through cross-divisional work, as well as continuing staff development ensures a welcoming space that promotes student learning and ultimately student success (Kezar, 2003).

#### **Building student success through faculty/student interaction and expert faculty.**

Encouraging interaction between faculty and students is an integral part of increasing students' level of comfortability on campus and showing them that they matter (CCCSE, 2010; K. P. Gonzalez, 2009; Hagedorn et al., 2002; Moore et al., 2017). Faculty making an effort to learn students' names and a bit about them can make students feel welcome and understood (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009). Faculty who offer their time and resources, both tangible and intangible, can greatly impact the development of students and how successful they can be (CCCSE, 2010; Hagedorn et al., 2002). Students want to know where they stand with professors and how they are progressing in their coursework so faculty who take the time to discuss a student's

performance can be an important factor in helping students succeed (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009). Furthermore, faculty should take opportunities to celebrate when a student has a relevant achievement or hits a particular goal to encourage persistence through challenging coursework (Moore et al., 2017). Student-centered faculty focus can make a distinct difference in how students feel cared for and their willingness to reach out for help when they need it along with increasing their willingness to attend and participate in class (CCCSE, 2010; Hagedorn et al., 2002). Faculty, apart from making themselves available for students and promoting interaction, should have an expertise in the field in which they are teaching (Hagedorn et al., 2002). This extends beyond simply being considered a good teacher or even an effective teacher, and includes possession of content knowledge in the subject matter that allows for a deeper interaction with the material (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Faculty who have this expert knowledge and can effectively communicate it to their students can help students understand the material presented at a more complex and higher level than a professor who only has superficial knowledge of a topic.

**Building student success through assessment, pre-requisites, and advising.** As students matriculate onto campus it is necessary for them to know where they stand academically and what their next steps should be as they progress on their educational journeys. Many students are unaware that they may need developmental or remedial coursework when they arrive to campus, but after assessing the students through placement exams it becomes clear that they are not prepared to begin at the recommended level for incoming students (CCCSE, 2012; Karp et al., 2016). Students who choose not to participate in the developmental or remedial courses or who are not even assessed at all may experience lower grades and more difficulty mainstreaming into the suggested courses which limits their student success (CCCSE, 2012). Placing students in

the correct level of a course based on assessments to test their abilities ensures that students are not overwhelmed in classes that they are not prepared for and which might disillusion them. There are also situations that arise in which institutions either do not encourage pre-requisite courses or there are too few courses offered to meet the needs of the students who would benefit from these classes (Mahon, Dumont, Morse, Pilati, & Smith, 2010). Similarly to the use of developmental and remedial courses, pre-requisite courses ensure that students have the skill sets they need to be successful before moving on to more rigorous coursework. For students who enter higher level courses without having taken pre-requisite courses to prepare, the transition can be challenging (Mahon et al., 2010). Furthermore, professors who are teaching high level courses will then be impacted in the way that they teach the course if they have students who they do not feel are as prepared as their peers. Professors may continue to teach as they normally would and experience the underprepared students struggling to understand the material or professors may choose to teach with the underprepared students in mind lowering the rigor of the course and thus unintentionally making the course easier for the students who are prepared with the skills to succeed (Mahon et al., 2010). Ensuring that students are armed with the knowledge and skills to succeed at a level of rigor that is appropriate for their skill sets contributes to student success.

While most institutions require that students meet with academic advisors or counselors to select their coursework for the upcoming semester there is room for more in-depth interaction between students and those aiding in constructing their educational futures as advisors are meant to serve as a support for students (Karp et al., 2016). Advisors should be playing the role of liaisons for the college experience helping students set academic goals for themselves and building a plan to help achieve those goals (CCCSE, 2012). Though most students report that

advisors do help them select their courses, few students note deeper conversation beyond an advisor simply completing their schedules and sending them on their way (CCCSE, 2012). Advisors must think beyond each semester to help students envision their larger overarching goals and what steps, and courses, to take to get there. It is also necessary for advisors to help students understand time commitments and expectations for courses, as well as how to balance the demands of work, school, and a social life so that students are not taking on an overwhelming course load (CCCSE, 2012). Karp et al. (2016) suggest an advising-as-teaching approach similar to the interaction between a student and their instructor in which the advisor offers relevant information for the student's success, but also employs a student's higher level reasoning and problem solving skills. When advisors serve as guides and offer pertinent criticism and feedback, this helps students reflect more deeply on their academic decisions as well as their future career goals, goals that an advisor can help a student plan for and achieve (Karp et al., 2016; Nwaokoro, 2010; Strayhorn, 2015). Instituting mandatory in-depth advising can prepare students for challenges that they do not foresee and can be a source of information and support for every student, including students who may not feel like advising is necessary or useful to them (Karp et al., 2016). Future endeavors toward effective advising procedures include instituting technology-based approaches that help advisors use data to identify students who are struggling so that they can intercept these students and help get them the resources they need to be successful (Karp et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2017).

**Building student success through student support/student success courses.** One of the resources that advisors can utilize to help students succeed is enrollment in student support or student success courses that are targeted at ensuring students have the skills and resources to succeed in college. Courses such as these focus on building skill sets that will be useful to

students as they progress through college, including how to better manage their time and tips for effective study habits (CCCSE, 2012). Oftentimes students find the amount of time they must spend on their studies overwhelming compared to their high school requirements and are daunted by how to begin studying for exams (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009). This stress coupled with attempting to balance various time commitments such as family, friends, and jobs can be very challenging for students who do not know how to effectively manage their time (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009). Through these courses students also become more familiar with the facilities housed on campus and the resources available to them which in turn help them know where to go when they need assistance or information (CCCSE, 2012). These courses typically take place during a student's first semesters on campus, but may also be instituted in the summer months before school officially begins to give students who may need extra time an advantage (Moore et al., 2017). In addition, while some institutions recommend enrollment in these courses, others mandate that all incoming students must participate in a student success or student support course to increase their chances of success (CCCSE, 2012; Moore et al., 2017) Participation in courses of this type lead students to be successful overall as they tend to have higher grades and persist until graduation with a degree (CCCSE, 2012).

**Building student success through access to resources.** Once students learn about the skills and resources necessary to be successful in college, it is vital that they are able to access the resources that they need on campus. For example, access to technological resources such as internet, computers, and printers can mean the difference between success and failure for some students (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Students who may not have their own devices or may have an unfortunate circumstance in which their device is not operational rely on resources such as campus computer labs to be able to compose and print papers for class or to gather documents

and materials for a course. Schools must aim to make these resources available at convenient times and to have enough resources available to meet student needs (Hagedorn et al., 2002).

Access to experiential learning opportunities is also an incredibly helpful resource for student success. Experiential learning can include community projects, apprenticeships, internships, or even experience in the field in which the student is interested (CCCSE, 2012). Engagement with these types of resources can help students build relationships which will aid them in their education and possibly even their future careers (CCCSE, 2012). While hands-on experience can be a great supplement to instruction, some students may need more context and help regarding coursework.

Access to tutoring can support students who may be struggling with grasping material in class. Tutoring can raise student's overall grades, as well as help them pass courses that are proving to be a challenge for them (CCCSE, 2012). There is no unilateral approach to tutoring and it can be offered in several forms including one-on-one, group, or technologically enhanced so that each student is receiving the type of instruction that works best for them in an environment with which they are most comfortable (CCCSE, 2012). Offering several methods and opportunities for tutoring can increase student engagement and understanding of the materials which in turn leads to student success. While most institutions offer tutoring as an optional or recommended form of supplemental instruction, Barhoum (2018) suggests that making tutoring mandatory could also cause an increase in a student's level of success. For example, requiring students to attend the campus writing center to receive help on papers not only gives students insight into where they need the most assistance, but also establishes a relationship with someone other than the instructor that the student can rely on (Barhoum, 2018). Tutoring centers can also offer a sense of community where students know that they will get the

help they need in a non-judgmental environment (Barhoum, 2018). While tutoring can increase a student's understanding of a course and improve their grades, it is also an opportunity for students to interact with peers who serve as tutors, as well as other students who are focused on enhancing their knowledge and academic skills (Barhoum, 2018). Being surrounded by like-minded students who are active participants in their education can encourage success in students who are experiencing academic difficulties.

### **Building student success through on-campus job opportunities and career planning.**

Students matriculating at higher education institutions are often interested in obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary to secure a job in the field which they are most interested in. Therefore, career planning is not an uncommon stratagem employed on campuses. However, students may also be working congruently with their time on campus and must find a balance between coursework and other jobs. In fact, more than 75% of college students find themselves working while also attending classes (Noel-Levitz, 2010). While some students may attempt to work full-time, many students opt for part time employment options which can lead to increased academic performance compared with students who did not possess a job (Gleason, 1993). It is possible that successfully balancing the demands of work and school allows students to enhance their time management and organizational skills which leads to academic success. Though students may be employed off-campus, students can often find employment on-campus by applying for work study programs.

Work study programs utilize part-time student workers for jobs on-campus while assisting students with compensation in the form of financial aid (Hagedorn et al., 2002). These types of programs can help off-set the cost of attendance while allowing students to be present on campus during their work. Work study opportunities offer students valuable work experience and

simplify the hurdles that can manifest when students attempt to commute from on-campus classes to jobs that may be a significant distance from the institution (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Not only do commutes such as these place a strain on a student's time and energy level, there can also be extra costs accrued by driving or taking public transportation to travel to said off-campus job (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Furthermore, work study programs treat coursework as the primary reason for a student's presence on campus and strive to provide flexible scheduling around a student's class schedule and academic course load (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Ensuring that a delicate balance is maintained between work and classes is integral to achieving student success. If a student finds that it is financially necessary for them to procure employment, but the employment is placing an unnecessary strain on their time, their success could be impacted by decreased class attendance, lower grades, and slower course progression which could ultimately impact the student's graduation rate. A work study program can combat these issues while also aiding them in offsetting the financial burden that often comes with attending higher education.

A student's involvement in an on-campus work study program also more deeply engages the student within the institution's culture and helps them find a sense of belonging in an often confusing and overwhelming environment (Noel-Levitz, 2010). Not only can students gain crucial knowledge and skills at their on-campus jobs, but they may also find support in the form of their peers employed with them and staff members who serve as supervisors, mentors, and counselors during their tumultuous college years (Noel-Levitz, 2010). These connections can promote a student's commitment and persistence in higher education and enhance their success while matriculating. Connections made within on-campus employment can also build post-grad relationships which could in turn promote student success (Noel-Levitz, 2010). Building relationships and relationship skill sets can be incredibly useful for students as they interact in



the classroom and as they plan on future career goals. On-campus work study opportunities provide students with an environment to flex their social and interpersonal skills, an action they might not have had the privilege of encountering before (Noel-Levitz, 2010). By participating in work study programs students can build confidence while learning to work as part of a team striving toward a larger goal, key aspects to be aware of when transitioning from higher education into the workforce. Learning these themes can greatly increase student success while on campus and can prepare students for careers after college.

Extending beyond a student's time on campus and looking past graduation, it is important to prepare students for the job market and increase their chances of employment through access to career counseling, as well as career fairs. Resources such as these introduce students to a variety of job opportunities and allow students a chance to make valuable connections with key stakeholders in their career fields that can keep them apprised of upcoming job openings (Hagedorn et al., 2002).

Another benefit of career counseling and job fairs is the exposure to fields that students may not have considered as a viable career path for themselves. These resources offer students insight into what coursework would prove useful to garner the skills and knowledge necessary for certain job opportunities and can help students realize the possibilities of success behind their goals (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Furthermore, participating in career planning and counseling can promote more complex and challenging goals for students to work toward resulting in a higher commitment to class attendance and coursework (ACT, Inc., 2007). Planning of this type also ensures that students are working toward a career that will be the best possible fit for them which encourages success not only while they are matriculating within higher education, but also post-graduation (ACT, Inc., 2007). Allowing access to these types of resources early and often gives

students a chance to better plan their coursework to align with their future goals, ultimately culminating in a student's timely graduation and swift employment afterwards, both indicators of student success.

**Building student success through course flexibility and class size.** Due to the constraints that are placed on students from their various on and off-campus commitments paired with often large student to instructor ratios, allowing flexible course planning and adjusting class sizes are integral pieces in building student success.

For students who are balancing school, a job, and familial commitments, planning a course schedule around small, inflexible course offerings can be challenging (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Class registration can make hurdles even more insurmountable when registration is scheduled by seniority or certain student populations. By the time a first-time freshman student is able to register for a course it may already be entirely full or simply not offered at a time that is amenable to them. Offering a variety of courses at flexible times such as evenings, weekends, or offering accelerated course options helps to alleviate the stress of being unable to attend a course needed to graduate (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Institutions may also offer other campus resources such as the library or computer labs on evenings and weekends in order to better align with the flexibility of the course offerings (Hagedorn et al., 2002). Understanding the needs of students who may not mesh well with a traditional course scheduling can help institutions better assess student needs and prepare them for success.

Consideration for class sizes and professor to student ratios is another strategy that can improve student success. When students are enrolled in smaller classes with a lower ratio student to instructor ratio, they will receive more individualized attention and feedback that will help them make purposeful progress through their coursework (Barhoum, 2018). More meaningful

connections between students and their professors can be built when there are less students vying for the instructor's attention and the environment is one of inclusivity. Students are also encouraged to divulge more in a smaller classroom with one-on-one attention since there are less people demanding time with the professor. There is another added benefit of students feeling more comfortable when they are part of a smaller classroom as they can construct an atmosphere of trust with their instructor and their fellow students (Barhoum, 2018). More individualized attention from professors and enhancing student comfortability in the classroom both offer unparalleled opportunities to support student success.

**Building student success through campus and community engagement.** Building student success by becoming a more integral part of a college campus beyond simply attending class can be very beneficial to students seeking to find a sense of community. Students who become involved in their campus communities are more likely to be satisfied with their college experience, as well as succeed in attaining their degrees (Noel-Levitz, 2010). Furthermore, there is a direct correlation between students who push themselves to interact more socially and their acceptance and engagement within the campus culture (Astin, 1993; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). There are myriad ways for students to seek engagement and involvement in their campus communities. For example, new student orientation can offer in-depth insight into what clubs, volunteer opportunities, and social outlets are available on campus in addition to providing information regarding student support services (CCCSE, 2012). Knowing what options are present on campus is a vital step for students who wish to find a place of belonging and involvement. Programs such as first-year experience courses are another avenue for students to build community via a cohort of sorts composed of other students who are also new to the college campus environment. Courses such as these provide an opportunity for students to

mingle with their peers in a neutral environment while also getting better acquainted with the institution's staff and faculty (CCCSE, 2012). Furthermore, students who participate in learning communities and cohort based learning modules find a stronger bond with their classmates while also engaging more deeply at the academic and social levels (CCCSE, 2012). These engagements lead to increased student performance, which in turn can increase student retention and success.

Engagement and community building on campus can also evolve from student participation in on-campus employment. Working part-time on-campus while attending courses can help students to become more deeply integrated in the campus culture and forge relationships through their work environment, while choosing to work off-campus can impede a student's involvement in the campus community and isolate them from engagement on-campus (Noel-Levitz, 2010). Engagement through on-campus employment offers students an intimate understanding of the workings of the institution beyond attendance in class and can allow students an opportunity to more closely identify with the institution (Noel-Levitz, 2010). Employment on-campus is a chance for a fuller immersion into the culture and understanding of the institution while also giving students access to resources that will allow them to possess knowledge beyond the average student's understanding. This elevated knowledge deepens a student's commitment to the institution and to their own education as they are proud to be representatives of the campus and see themselves as part of a larger whole (Noel-Levitz, 2010). Students who willingly accept responsibility for tasks surrounding employment, clubs, or volunteer opportunities find a sense of commitment to those roles and to the institution at large (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Being a member of something larger than one's self can help to encourage students toward success and achievement of their degree.

Engagement and involvement on campus does more than expose students to relationships and bonds they might not otherwise have formed. Deepening student involvement also leads to increased academic performance particularly when students are engaged in educational activities or opportunities (Kuh et al., 2008). Beyond a rise in a student's grade point average, increased involvement can also lead to a higher rate of student persistence, particularly from a student's first year on campus to their second (Kuh et al., 2008). This finding is also true for students who are battling other factors that could inhibit their persistence such as being a first generation college student or coming from a lower socio-economic background. Students who continue to persist through their first years of college will have a greater chance of success and graduation.

**Building student success through mentorship.** Finding a support system in college is an integral part of a student gaining success amid an unfamiliar landscape (Collier, 2017). Mentorship can offer this support system while helping students overcome the social, academic, and personal hurdles that may arise during a student's time on campus. Mentoring can come in many forms and may occur at different stages in a student's academic career. The two basic categorizations of mentorship are hierarchical and peer mentoring.

Hierarchical mentorship can occur when a student is mentored by another person in a mature or elevated position, as in an academic advisor or a trusted professor (Collier, 2017). Students in this mentorship setting may receive support on their academic or career choices, as well as guidance on difficult choices that students may have to make in their collegiate careers.

However, peer mentorship occurs between two students in which one student possesses a greater knowledge and understanding of the college experience and can offer keen insight into best practices for success (Collier, 2017; Colvin & Ashman, 2010). In peer mentoring situations it is possible that the students may be similar in age and may therefore identify more closely with

one another. Students may find that they are more comfortable with a peer mentor recognizing them as someone who has undertaken similar challenges. Peer mentors should have a substantial amount of experience and knowledge compared to their mentees to ensure that they can offer support and insight where it is needed (Collier, 2017).

Mentoring can lead students to perform better academically and socially while also encouraging persistence to graduation (Collier, 2017). While both types of mentorship can be beneficial for students, it is wise for students to determine the areas in which they need the most support to assess what type of mentorship would best align with their goals. For example, career guidance could fall under the realm of an academic advisor or career counselor. Students who participate in on-campus employment may also find themselves becoming mentees of their supervisors or fellow, more experienced co-workers (Noel-Levitz, 2010). Some institutions have even integrated peer mentoring into programs that are strongly encouraged for students who may be struggling and require extra help along their academic journey (Moore et al., 2017). Providing students with support before they even realize they need it can help students stay on the path of success and resist dropping out from year to year. At many institutions mentoring via an academic advisor is mandatory to ensure that students are staying on track academically and taking courses that will help them reach graduation and their career goals beyond (Moore et al., 2017). Many campuses have recognized that mentorship, whether formal or informal, can greatly impact a student's resilience and willingness to remain matriculated which leads to higher overall student success (Moore et al., 2017). Institutions are also recognizing the power of mentorship in readying students for their careers after college with programs designed to match more senior students on the precipice of graduation with alumni in their career fields to assist in the transition from college to employment (Moore et al., 2017). In whatever form it is offered,

formal, informal, hierarchical, or peer, mentorship can prove to make an impressive impact on student success.

**Building student success through enhancing student knowledge and social capital.**

Preparing students for success at higher education institutions can be challenging when students do not have the proper knowledge and experience expected of them when they arrive on campus and beyond. While an already unfamiliar landscape, a college campus can become even more overwhelming when students must navigate new protocols, rules, and resources with seemingly little instruction prior to their matriculation. Building student's knowledge of the environment and expectations, as well as their social capital or, as Daly & Silver (2008) define the term, a type of coin or currency, where interactions and relationships function as resources that are able to be transformed into other forms of capital, can help to pave the way to student success.

One common area of growth is the adjustment to and understanding of college life. Students often find themselves with new found freedom, but are unsure how to best utilize their time, as well as becoming comfortable with students from various backgrounds and walks of life (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009). Students may find that college is a much more diverse environment than they have previously been exposed to in their high school experiences. It is also common for students who thrived academically in high school find that college coursework can pose more of a challenge. Rather than simple assignment completion, courses may require students to spend a great deal more time and energy on understanding the material presented to them, as well as more complex assignments involving synthesis of course material in order for students to succeed in the classroom (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009). Students must understand and be prepared to dedicate time and energy to attending classes and completing projects and assignments in a timely manner.

Coming to campus with a major in mind can also be a hurdle of knowledge for many students. While a student may have an idea of what major they plan to follow, there is more in-depth planning involved to ensure they are taking the correct courses and meeting the requirements of that major (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009). There is also the added obstacle of finding that many required courses for a major are only offered at specific times that may not be amenable to a student's schedule. Spending more time which a counselor or academic advisor can help students acquire the knowledge to navigate their course schedules and achieve the major they desire and ultimately help them become more successful in their academic careers (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009).

Enhancing student knowledge and social capital through peer and instructor interaction can also help to bolster student success. By taking the time to converse with others who have higher stores of knowledge and academic social capital, students can learn various ways in which to alleviate obstacles in the path of their student success. For example, simply purchasing textbooks can pose a challenge to students who are unfamiliar with the buying process (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009). Students may be unaware that there are multiple editions of a course textbook and inadvertently purchase the incorrect version which could hinder their success in the course (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009). Students may also be unsure of various buying options, believing that they can only purchase the text at the college bookstore rather than purchasing online. It may also not occur to students to look for the text in the institution's library and check the item out for free. Communication with peers or instructors on matters such as these could prove beneficial in enhancing students' knowledge and social capital to aid in their success.



## **Transition Strategies for Student Success**

The transition to college can be a tumultuous time for students who are adjusting from life within the relatively smaller bubble of high school to a new environment at an institute of higher education. There is much knowledge and social capital to be gained in this new landscape, but there are also obstacles that can impede student success. It is important to investigate transition strategies that encourage and promote the success of students as they embark on their higher education journeys.

Many students struggle transitioning into life at a college or university for many reasons. One such reason is a lack of academic preparedness that results in students being placed in remedial courses once they have matriculated on campus (Community College Research Center, 2013). Students who do not meet the requirements or expectations for certain introductory level courses will be placed in remedial versions until their knowledge and skills are considered acceptable enough to continue at the anticipated level. Nearly fifty-percent of incoming students matriculating at two and four-year institutions find themselves placed in one or more remedial courses due to academic inadequacy in the course subject matter (Hodara, 2013). Worse yet, when students are placed into such remedial courses it significantly and negatively impacts the likelihood that they will persist until graduation (Adelman, 2004). Students who are already academically delayed when they arrive on campus have greater difficulty catching up to their peers which can be discouraging for student success.

Students also struggle with the transition to college due to their deficiency in skill sets which set them up for success upon matriculation. These could include the ability to manage one's time efficiently, strategies for studying effectively, and identifying where and when to ask for help when it is needed (Conley, 2007). Not possessing these sets of skills or being delayed in

cultivating them can make the transition to college even more difficult for students and can ultimately impede their success.

A larger scale issue concerning students' transition to college arises in the disconnect between high schools and higher education institutions. Since the high school environment is quite different from a college or university environment students often find that the expectations and responsibilities are uniquely different upon their matriculation which can result in a much more turbulent transition than expected (Kirst & Venezia, 2003). This gap in preparation for higher education can leave students without the skills, knowledge, and expectations to help them succeed in their new environments. In order to combat this gap in education and expectation high schools, colleges, and universities are beginning to partner with one another to create a culture of college readiness and success (Community College Research Center, 2013). Specifically, employing college readiness assessments and building a curriculum centered on successful college transition can help to bridge the gap that many students experience (Community College Research Center, 2013).

College readiness assessments are constructed to measure students' knowledge and skill sets to determine how well they will be able to perform in a college or university setting. Typically employed during a student's junior year of high school, these assessments are targeted at determining how successful a student will be when presented with basic, introductory coursework (Community College Research Center, 2013). The assessments help to introduce students to the expectations of college coursework while also highlighting at what level their skills currently are. These types of assessments help to alleviate confusion over expected knowledge and skills while also lessening the likelihood that students will find themselves in remedial classes once they matriculate (Community College Research Center, 2013). Currently

there are over thirty-eight states that have employed a college readiness assessment directed at either the state or local level to help enhance student success as they move from high school to a higher education institution (Community College Research Center, 2013). Furthermore, states that have not yet employed a college readiness assessment for their students are now considering doing so as more options for assessment tools become available nationwide. These assessments, when employed in time to adjust students' trajectories can help to aid their success in their transition to college and beyond.

In tandem with college readiness assessments, curricula targeted at the transition of students from high school to college can also breed student success. Transition curricula are built around interceding on behalf of students who may not be where they are expected to be academically (Community College Research Center, 2013). Students who may be lacking in certain subject areas and would otherwise likely be enrolled in remedial coursework in college, can be aided by participating in a curriculum centered on transition. While the idea of full-scale curriculums dedicated to transitioning and preparing students for college is more recent it is nonetheless growing in popularity. Currently twenty-nine states have adopted transition curricula with full courses available to target academic areas in which students may be lacking (Community College Research Center, 2013). Typically courses in math are found to be the most common types of transition courses that students enroll in, with courses such as English being the next most popular (Community College Research Center, 2013). Courses are also available in a variety of formats including online, in order to accommodate as many students as possible. While most transition courses have been constructed at the local level and employed by high schools, there is a population of curricula that have been designed in conjunction with both high schools and colleges involved (Community College Research Center, 2013). These courses offer

the flexibility to prepare students before they are relegated to remedial coursework and intervene before student success is too heavily impacted.

While being successful in the classroom can greatly increase a student's chance of success when transitioning to college, what students choose to do with their free time can also have a significant impact on their levels of success. Selecting different activities to become a part of or experiences to participate in can aid students in gaining social capital, as well as opening them up to new learning experiences and skill sets that no introductory course is going to teach them (Herring, 2018). It is important for students who are transitioning to college to think about what types of activities, experiences, and social situations that were most appealing to them during their time in high school and how those things could impact them negatively or positively once they arrive on campus (Herring, 2018). This can help to frame a student's day to day outside of the classroom and better understand their goals and needs when getting more involved on their new campus. It can be useful for students to assemble a chart of their high school activities detailing the reasoning behind participating in the activity, the aspects of the experience that they most enjoyed, what may not have been enjoyable for them, and then the skills or lessons that the student gained from the activity (Herring, 2018). Mapping out extracurriculars this way can help students better visualize their involvement in certain activities and aid them in making decisions about what sorts of activities to pursue in their college careers that will enhance their success, as well as prepare them for careers after college.

In becoming more immersed in the college experience it is important, if possible, to plan to live on campus for optimal exposure to all that the institution has to offer students. While students who live on campus can make spontaneous decisions to participate in a certain activity or extracurricular, students who live off campus and commute must manage their time wisely

and plan when they will be on campus to avoid making multiple unnecessary trips. Commuter students often find it difficult to make extracurricular and involvement activities work in their schedules and thus do not participate as highly as students who already reside on campus (Herring, 2018). This can diminish their access to opportunities to enhance their social capital, as well as their student success. Participating in groups directed at commuter students can be a useful way to meet others that are experiencing the same obstacles of getting involved (Herring, 2018). It is also beneficial for students who commute and are not regularly spending their hours outside of the classroom on campus, to attempt to study in new areas or visit popular social spots between classes for the opportunity to engage with their peers more and have a stronger finger on the pulse of campus (Herring, 2018). Even short breaks can prove fruitful for interacting and becoming more socially involved.

Involvement, for some students, may also come in the form of employment on or off campus. Students who work off-campus, not unlike commuter students, may experience a disconnect from campus depending upon how many hours they work. For students on campus, they may be employed through a work study program or by other establishments on campus that aim to hire students during the academic year (Herring, 2018). Apart from being more closely connected to campus, on campus jobs have other benefits as well. On campus employers have a deeper understanding of students' schedules and will allow greater flexibility when it comes to what hours students are able to work while offering a more rigid work day that occurs between normal class hours (Herring, 2018). Furthermore, work study opportunities place caps on the amount of hours which students can work so that their jobs do not begin to interfere with their academic progress (Herring, 2018). While working fifteen hours or less a week can be beneficial for students who are transitioning to college, more than fifteen hours a week spent on a job can

begin to overwhelm students and negatively impact their attention to their coursework (Herring, 2018). However, access to on campus jobs can help students make peer, professor, and staff connections that they might otherwise not have because they provide opportunities for students to interact with a wider group of individuals (Herring, 2018). These interactions can manifest in opportunities to identify a mentor, gain vital insider knowledge, and learn about other opportunities on campus all while either making a paycheck or fulfilling work study financial aid. Being a part of the workforce on campus also helps students feel a stronger sense of belonging to the larger population (Herring, 2018). Having so many aspects of one's life intertwined with the day-to-day activities of the campus deepens the connection between the student and their dedication to the institution, all while gaining valuable experience that can serve them well beyond graduation.

Beneficial post-graduation experience that can aid in a student's transition to college can also be found in various other outlets on campus. For work experience, an internship can not only help students build valuable skill sets, but can also aid a student in honing their future career goals (Herring, 2018). To ease their transition into the competitive collegiate world of internships and career planning, students should fully utilize their career services or career development office on campus. These resource offices offer great insight into helping students set goals for themselves and facilitating the structure of their college career and beyond (Herring, 2018). Places such as these can answer students' questions regarding availability of internships and opportunities, along with the level of competition they can expect when applying. Furthermore, these offices can prepare students for what potential employers may be looking for in an employee, how to polish their resume in order to stand out among a sea of candidates, the importance of placing oneself in a position to be noticed and networking with those who can

provide the information and connections needed, and how to respond to interview questions, all of which are skills that can be useful in college and beyond (Herring, 2018). Identifying offices that have vital resources for students can help increase social capital and connectedness all while easing the transition to college for new students.

Other ways in which students can tap into resources and gain experience could come from opportunities through research, externships, leadership positions on campus, or community service. For example, getting involved with student government, becoming a representative for an office on campus, or finding ways to become involved in one's dormitory are all options for students to ease their college transition through involvement and activities (Herring, 2018). Participating in community service activities through one's campus is a great way to become more deeply involved while also giving back. Not only do students have an opportunity to volunteer doing something that they are passionate about, but it exposes them to a front row learning experience that they would not otherwise be privy to inside the walls of a classroom (Herring, 2018). Furthermore, taking part in community service activities fosters goodwill and increases self-esteem through helping others who sincerely need support all while being exposed to new and differing viewpoints that can challenge a student's preconceived notions about a situation or group of people (Herring, 2018). These experiences help students situate themselves within the larger framework of the world and put their own struggles and challenges into a more focused perspective. Many students can find opportunities to volunteer or do community service through various clubs offered on campus directed at this type of work, but students can find that there are clubs and organizations for almost any type of interest imaginable on a college campus.

Students who are involved in some form or club or organization on campus tend to have higher GPAs and graduation rates than students who choose not to participate in these activities

(Herring, 2018). It can be helpful for students to join a variety of clubs when they first matriculate on campus including something that they are invested in as this type of organization will likely attract like-minded people that can become fast friends for students who are new to campus and are seeking comfort from familiarity (Herring, 2018). Pushing boundaries and comfort zones however, can also be an exciting transition strategy for new students by joining a club or organization that may spark interest, but is not something they have ever tried before. Since college is a time of transition and change, trying a new challenge can be the perfect opportunity for students to unfold their potential and capabilities (Herring, 2018). Becoming involved in a more academically focused club or organization can also aid in students' success and transition by offering a support system for tough coursework and difficult projects (Herring, 2018). There are numerous opportunities and a wealth of different paths to consider when joining a club or organization, but the variety helps to broaden students' horizons as they step into a new environment.

Participation in academic clubs and organizations, as well as job opportunities on campus can also put students in more close contact with faculty which can help to ease their transition into the college environment. Students often find it difficult to know or understand how to engage with faculty inside of the classroom, let alone outside of one, but students who do so are more likely to experience success through higher GPAs and are more likely to complete their degrees (Herring, 2018). While participating in a faculty member's office hours can be a good place to start engaging with them outside of the classroom, there are other avenues to consider as well. One such avenue is becoming involved in a faculty member's research (Herring, 2018). This could entail aiding in research for a book or perhaps working in a lab on experiments, but becoming more deeply ingrained in an area of research that is interesting can help students



identify their true interests and passions, as well as forging relationships with faculty members that can result in mentorship opportunities and possibilities for recommendations should the student wish to pursue a graduate degree (Herring, 2018). In addition to these benefits, students can build skill sets that can prove useful as they continue on their college pathways. Students may also choose to engage with faculty members on an independent study project that is of interest to them. These projects typically involve working closely with faculty to develop a research project that is of interest to the student which can then even be parlayed into a thesis or capstone project as the student progresses through their college career (Herring, 2018). This type of project gives students a chance to hone their research interests and build valuable relationships with faculty who share those interests.

Though it is tempting to become fully immersed in campus life, students should aim to explore their surroundings off campus in order to ease their transition into a new place (Herring, 2018). Finding new places to eat, exploring tourist attractions, or just walking around the community can be a great way to experience new things and find new interests. Many community establishments offer significant student discounts for their services and may include places like museums, theaters, and stores which can give students an opportunity to experience interesting endeavors for a fraction of the price (Herring, 2018). Students should be vigilant of what is happening in their communities that may be of interest to them. Asking friends, peers, faculty, and staff can offer great insights into various opportunities throughout the community, as well as searching organization's websites for upcoming events (Herring, 2018). Finding outlets to explore outside of the campus community can help to broaden students' scope of their college experience and alleviate the unfamiliarity associated with transitioning into college and a new environment.

Though the transition to college and adjustment to a new environment can be challenging for many students, it can be particularly difficult for first generation students. The first generation student population has been steadily growing in recent years and now comprises roughly 24% of the total number of undergraduate students (Rausch, 2017). With such a large number of students falling into this group it is important to ensure that they are just as successful as their multi-generational peers. While there are strategies for transitioning all students to college and preparing them for student success, there are also areas where first generation students may need more support and attention. It is necessary to examine these areas more closely in relation to how they can promote student success, increase social capital, and ease first generation students' transition to college.

**Transition strategies for first generation student success.** First generation students often find their transition to college challenging because they lack the social capital that many of their multi-generational peers already have. This population is more likely to encounter difficulties in obtaining access and understanding the necessary information relevant to making the most successful choices regarding everything from persistence and degree completion and what institution is the best fit, to the best types of academic and social selections to participate in once they matriculate (Pascarella et al., 2004). Though multi-generational students tend to receive guidance from their college graduate parents or guardians, first-generation students however, are not privy to this access and information. For first generation students entering into academia it is often overwhelming and intimidating as it is an alien environment for them (Oldfield, 2007). Though intimidated and overwhelmed they may be, it is not that first-generation students are incapable of completing their academic work, but that they suffer from a deep sense of isolation on campus that contributes to their negative transition (Oldfield, 2007).

Furthermore, while first generation students may possess support from their families and friends, the policies and procedures of higher education institutions can prove overly daunting, with obstacles spanning from the beginning of the application process to applying for financial aid, and even choosing a major (Sparks, 2017). With these challenges in mind, it is clear that many first-generation students lack the necessary experience, skill sets, and knowledge, or social capital, to acclimate and transition seamlessly into the collegiate environment. Before delving into the particular strategies for enhancing social capital with the goal of easing first generation student transition it is necessary to understand a bit more about the definition of social capital.

**Academic social capital as it pertains to first generation student transition.** There are a variety of definitions for social capital as it pertains to higher education and first-generation students. One definition suggests that social capital lies within the connections between humans and their efficacy to use resources rooted within their personal web or social circles, conversely to resources which are held individually by a person (Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013). Similarly, Ruth (2018) defines social capital as dependent upon one's ability to construct networks that are an amalgamation of various relationships with a variety of players that eventually come to build agreeable yields. Another definition states that social capital is related to intertwined networks that endow one with certain social resources which can then be manipulated in multiple avenues of social existence (Tierney, 2012). While there are various existing definitions of social capital, an overarching similarity appears to be the necessity of constructing an influential social network with diverse social interactions in order to obtain the most advantageous social capital possible. How first generation students procure these social networks and experience these diverse social interactions can come from many sources.

**Involvement as a transition strategy for first generation students.** A foundational element of building a dynamic social network, involvement, is one of the largest themes seen in the literature surrounding first generation student social capital and success. There are a multitude of ways for first generation students to become involved on campus, including extracurricular activities and engagement with peers. Involvement is one of the primary environments for first generation students to attain social capital both in and out of the classroom by being exposed to different situations and persons that can broaden the scope of their knowledge and skill sets. Taking part in the heuristic hub of life on campus, particularly through various extracurricular activities, is very valuable for students due to the chance to offer students an occasion to construct the types of cultural and social resources that the elite class strata deem pertinent (Stuber, 2009). Furthermore, participating in a more numerous and varied plethora of clubs and organizations on campus strengthens and grows student networks to a greater extent thus allowing an increase in resources. This swell of resources can then lead to an increase in a student's social capital (Lancee, 2012).

The significance of first generation students taking every opportunity to participate in as many experiences as is feasible while on campus cannot be dismissed (Tierney, 2012). Whether a student joins an academic club, an intramural sport, or a fraternity or sorority, there are many options on campus, all of which have something to offer first generation students that can help to ease their transition to college and help to build valuable social capital by exposing them to new knowledge, people, and situations. Lin (2000) discusses the surreptitious existence of homophily, or a tendency to interact with people of a similar background or socioeconomic status. However, for first generation students to obtain unburdened access to a new cache of social capital, it is necessary for them to be amenable to intermingling with various campus groups, organizations,

and activities, along with, student populations dissimilar to themselves (Lin, 2000). These dynamic networks offer admission to an abundance of social capital for first generation students who are new to and unfamiliar with the campus environment.

**Building connections as a transition strategy for first generation students.** Building connections is another influential strategy for first generation students to build social capital that will help ease their transition into the college landscape. This strategy can include engaging with faculty and staff on campus, relationships with various institutional agents, networking around campus, and employing social media to extend one's reach with peers and the campus at large. First generation students may find it particularly challenging to engage with faculty and staff because of their uncertainty in how to broach a conversation with them. Student comfortability with faculty and staff, whether it be inside or outside of the classroom is significant to a successful student transition (Hutchison, 2017). Discussing homework and assigned projects along with receiving feedback from experienced campus experts can help to cultivate a sense of reassurance in first-generation students who lack the certainty that some of their multi-generational peers may possess.

However, an obstacle to creating these connections could be the increasingly large class sizes of introductory and general requirement college courses. When colleges and universities register class sizes that are comprised of hundreds of students it can greatly inhibit opportunities for students to initiate relationships with faculty, teaching assistants, and peers, and could also potentially weaken the quality and number of networking resources as there is a greater amount of students competing for them (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). Having unfettered access and the ability to build relationships with changemakers and institutional agents around campus can

greatly and positively impact the likelihood of a smooth transition for first-generation students (V. V. Gonzalez, 2013; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

While the influential essence of both networking and making connections throughout campus is significant, there are concerns regarding social media as a networking device to build relationships and gain social capital. The decline in face to face, tangible interactions is lamented for students, specifically first generation students who may be seeking social capital (Andreas, 2018). This type of virtual engagement contributes to a loss of face to face interactions, an undesirable outcome for relationship building, but it has also led to a decline in soft skills, also referred to as people skills (Andreas, 2018). When students are not accustomed to engaging with others through one on one conversations in a social setting, they are not in the best position to construct foundational relationships and build networks that will be beneficial for their social capital.

Conversely, there are avenues of thought that suggest the increased usage of social media as a means for obtaining social capital is a positive occurrence because it offers more non-traditional opportunities for first-generation students to introduce themselves to their peers and engage with faculty and staff in a more casual and comfortable environment (Duggan, 2002; Hottell, Martinez-Aleman, & Rowan-Kenyon, 2014; Wohn et al., 2013). Many first generation students who feel intimidated to approach faculty, staff, or other students may feel more at ease in using a more distanced type of communication method. Aside from social media offering a less intimidating communication method, there are also opportunities for connecting with networks outside of the campus community. First generation students may also utilize social media to stay in touch with family and hometown friends. Though network and connection building through social media may not be the traditional pathway, encouraging the expansion of

connections for first generation students can lead to an increase in social capital and help to ease the transition to the college environment which will help them become successful students.

**Mentorship as a transition strategy for first generation student success.** While involvement and making connections are both impactful strategies for transitioning students, mentorship is also an important piece of the overall transition process for first-generation students by offering them access to social capital through others who will aid them in navigating their journey. A useful way to implement mentorship between peers is for freshmen first-generation students to meet with veteran first-generation students in order to hear their stories and learn from their mistakes and successes (Oldfield, 2007). Seasoned first generation students can aid in making the transition more seamless for freshmen by exhibiting to them that the environment may be unfamiliar and intimidating at times, but that it is certainly navigable. Furthermore, mentorship gives first-generation students the chance to thrive socially, as well as emotionally leading to their success on campus (Sparks, 2017).

When choosing a type of mentorship first generation students would do well to consider both formal and informal mentoring experiences as students may find that one type is more amenable to their needs (Sparks, 2017). A common avenue to receive mentorship is through a students' academic advisor who can answer questions of all types and topics which can lead to a thorough distribution of social capital (Duggan, 2002). Advisors have a wealth of information available to students and are more than willing to share. They can answer questions regarding class schedules, what professors to make sure to interact with, and even how best to navigate the campus. Often, advisors are also able to elucidate undisclosed social codes making them more explicit and understandable for first-generation students that may be confused about the ways in which to operate or how to proceed in certain situations that may arise on a college campus

(Valle, 2017). Students may also choose a staff member, a professor, or a peer to serve as a mentor for them depending on what they are most fervently seeking from a mentor. A mentor could fill the role of a formal counselor or an informal, personal confidante, however each type can be an integral part of a first-generation students' successful transition.

**Promoting well-being as a transition strategy for first generation student success.** A significant transition strategy for first generation students is the importance of promoting a sense of well-being. Well-being can include building up a student's self-esteem, instilling a sense of resiliency in them, and further encouraging a feeling of belonging within the campus community. The importance of a campus climate that fosters first-generation student acclimation cannot be understated. A campus should employ a welcoming and interactive environment that first generation students feel a sense of community with, not a landscape that causes them alienation and isolation (Lovano McCann, 2017). Belonging is an integral part of first-generation students feeling at ease enough to try to obtain social capital through involvement, mentorship, and connections while transitioning into life on campus.

In conjunction with this is the influential nature of promoting self-pride in first-generation college students (Reyes-Osorio, 2017). Having students take ownership of their own success allows them to feel a deeper sense of accomplishment in their transition. This boost of confidence also helps to alleviate the guilt many first generation students experience over leaving home to attend college (Reyes-Osorio, 2017). First-generation students can feel empowered to achieve their goals through instilling a strong sense of resiliency and consistent positive self-talk.

Encouraging emotional support for first-generation students and understanding that they may be adjusting differently than their peers is essential to ease their transition. Fostering a strong sense of competency in first generation students also helps them understand that though



they may be in an arena with peers who have higher levels of experience, they are equally capable of success (Aspelmeier et al., 2012; Mitchall, 2015). By raising first-generation students' confidence and expectations of themselves and their abilities they are encouraged to more actively promote themselves and explore more ways to obtain social capital that will support their student success (Strand, 2013). Expecting success from first generation students and promoting a strong sense of well-being can go a long way in seamlessly transitioning them to college.

### **Courses, Policies, and Programs Directed at First Generation Student Success**

While the aforementioned strategies strive to show the ways in which first generation students can take part in their own student success and facilitate a smooth transition to college, it is necessary to discuss the particular strategies that higher education institutions can employ which are directly aimed at first generation student success. These are resources which target first generation students and are designed to help them achieve student success from the time they arrive on campus and beyond. The first type of this resource is seminar courses designed specifically with first generation students in mind.

First year seminar courses are traditionally required of freshman students entering into a college or university. Designed to cover introductory themes surrounding becoming a college student, there are now courses designed with first generation students' needs in mind. Students find these courses incredibly helpful, particularly when they introduce information or assignments that are specifically relevant to them (Glaessgen, MacGregor, Cornelius-White, Hornberger, & Baumann, 2018). In a particular first generation student seminar students were assigned an interview with a professor with the intention of the student becoming more familiar with the professor and making a connection. While the assignment was intimidating it was also

successful because it pushed the students out of their comfort zones and had them engaging with faculty that could make an impact on them (Glaessgen et al., 2018). Students who participated noted at the completion of the assignment that they were less afraid to speak to professors and found them to be a great wealth of resources (Glaessgen et al., 2018). First generation seminars also offer a safe space for students to meet other first generation students. These students can lean on and learn from each other while supporting their collective success during their transition and identifying with the normalcy of meeting others like themselves (Glaessgen et al., 2018). Courses like these make a built-in community for first generation students that helps lessen the tumultuous feelings that often come with transitioning to college.

Aside from courses such as first generation student seminars, there are other policies that can be implemented to help first generation students specifically. Since faculty play such a large role in the transition of students and their ultimate success on campus, it can be beneficial to have faculty take a more active role in supporting first generation students. Requiring professional development workshops for faculty to learn how to meet and work with first generation students can help them better understand the needs of the population (Cunningham, A., Cooper, M. A., Leegwater, L., & Smith, E., 2012). Going further, when posting descriptions for new or changing faculty positions, institutions should strive to use verbiage that denotes first generation student specific action items or focus showing support to these students (Cunningham et al., 2012). Institutions also need to take the opportunity to get feedback from faculty regarding which courses first generation students seem to struggle most with and which they are succeeding in to identify strategies for change (Cunningham et al., 2012). For courses in which first generation students are failing at a higher rate it can be useful to implement extra instructional support through additional instruction or mentors to aid students who may require

extra help (Cunningham et al., 2012). Employing more holistic methods of instruction for first generation students, focusing on the student as a whole, can also enhance student success in and out of the classroom (Cunningham et al., 2012). First generation students often need support in different areas or through different methods than their multi-generational peers and therefore institutions must utilize a variety of strategies to reach the population successfully.

Starting at the level of admission institutions need to track the number of first generation students who are admitted and who eventually matriculate on campus so that an accurate count is in place (Cunningham et al., 2012). From there institutions can identify the size of their first generation student population and make more focused decisions regarding how to orient them to campus and support them. Institutions should also advertise that they are an environment that is inclusive and supportive of first generation students. By publishing a mission statement that includes service to first generation students and showcasing a website and social media presence that is supportive of the population students will be more likely to enroll and feel seen (Cunningham et al., 2012). When examining strategies that have worked, institutions can partner together to create new initiatives directed at first generation student success methods (Cunningham et al., 2012). In setting expectations and goals for first generation enrollment and support institutions can begin to cultivate environments where students thrive and succeed.

First generation students may need additional support and guidance even before they fully matriculate on campus. Summer bridge programs can be a beneficial way for students to have an introduction to their new environment before classes begin. Courses vary in their structure and content, but generally take place in the summer between high school and college and last a week to several weeks depending upon the institution and the depth of the program (Henson, 2018). While some bridge programs are designed with a more casual social integration

in mind, other programs focus on acclimating students to the highest degree possible even allowing students to participate in summer courses for credit to jumpstart their college careers (Henson, 2018). Programs generally set very clear goals and expectations for participants so that there is little confusion about what should be accomplished during the allotted time period (Henson, 2018). Bridge programs also provide great opportunities for first generation students to make contacts with faculty and staff, as well as peers and cohort members. These relationships can potentially evolve into mentorship opportunities that could span the length of a students' college career (Henson, 2018). Academically focused bridge programs have shown to be moderately successful in not only enhancing college readiness, but in resulting increased GPA's and academic performance. However, regardless of institutional focus, first generation students who participated in bridge programs were more likely to persist past their first year of college (Henson, 2018). Programs like these, designed with first generation students in mind help to ease the transition to college allowing for a less pressured environment in which to become accustomed to the expectations and social norms of the campus.

## **Summary**

This chapter began by examining what college student success looks like for the general college-going population and then delved deeper into what constitutes student success. Both academic contributors and non-academic contributors were examined to ascertain the college environment as a whole as it pertains to student success. After elucidating contributors to student success, obstacles were investigated; situations or circumstances that impeded or halted the progress of student success. From there it was necessary to examine how to build student success through different avenues. The focus then turned to how to best transition students into college so that they were primed for student success. While student success for the general population of

students had taken precedence earlier in the chapter, the latter part shifted and centered on first generation students and the particular struggles they face when transitioning to college. Many of these struggles are based upon first generation students' lack of social capital that may already be a part of multi-generational students' knowledge base. Ways in which to ease first generation student transition while building social capital and enhancing student success were then discussed with particular attention paid to courses, policies, and programs that are specifically designed for first generation students and their success. While there is no specific equation for student success, the resources offered here present a beneficial collection of best practices. Moving forward, Chapter 3 will further discuss the research design and methodology of this study.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will elucidate upon the research design and methodology employed in this study which seeks to understand the best practices in transitioning and achieving student success for first generation students. Within this chapter is a re-statement of the study's research questions along with the nature of the study and the methodology employed to complete the study including the appropriateness of using a phenomenological approach for this particular study. The research design will also be discussed in conjunction with the process of data collection and interview techniques and protocol touching on the protection of human subjects and their privacy, as well as criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Data analysis will be considered and an examination of personal bias will also occur in this chapter.

### **Re-Statement of Research Questions**

This chapter describes the research methods that were applied to achieve the objectives of this study, which is to primarily answer these four research questions:

RQ1: What strategies are used by higher education institutions to increase first generation student success?

RQ2: What challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success?

RQ3: How do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success?

RQ4: What recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students?

## **Nature of the Study**

Qualitative research is a nebulous and shifting type of inquiry that can encompass social construction, interpretivism, and even global and social justice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This type of research “locates the observer in the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3) and “consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 3). Practices employed during qualitative research are transformative and can alter an environment “into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3).

Qualitative research offers a rich understanding of subject material by approaching studies in a naturalistic way with researchers observing subjects within their natural surroundings while trying to decipher the meanings behind different types of phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research also constructs patterns and themes by utilizing deductive and inductive data analysis that amalgamates into a finished product which gives credence and voice to those who participated, the researcher’s own reflexivity, an in-depth understanding of the subject matter and issue, as well as where it all falls in the context or the current literature or calling for a change (Creswell, 2013).

## **Methodology**

This qualitative research study employed a phenomenological design. A phenomenological study centers around a “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Researchers who utilize phenomenology seek to understand what the group, as a whole, shares or has in common with one another (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology sets a goal to decrease the individuality of an experience and instead look for a more robust universality between people

that constitutes the phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers will examine a human experience shared by many and proceed to data collection from those that have been privy to the specific type of phenomena being studied. Once the researcher has a conglomeration of the data, he or she seeks to construct a “composite description” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75) that explains the “essence of the experience” (p. 75) for participants. The composite will generally describe what phenomena the participants experienced and how this phenomena affected them (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological research places focus on a certain type of phenomenon that warrants further exploration. Working with groups as small as three to as large as fifteen, this type of research seeks to gather subjects who have had experiences with the same phenomenon and collecting data by interviewing them regarding these experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By hearing how participants each experienced a phenomenon and what effect such an experience had on them can result in an overarching “essence” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77) that draws all the experiences together.

**Structured process of phenomenology.** This particular study utilizes transcendental phenomenology which highlights participant’s descriptions of their experiences rather than the individual interpretations made by the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology employs methods of bracketing or epoche that encourages the researcher to divest themselves of their own experience and attempt to enter the study without preconceived notions to bias the results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Before beginning a study the researcher can employ bracketing to offer their perspective from their experience with the phenomenon being studied, but can then begin as freshly as possible with the participants who will be interviewed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through compilation and organization of the data gathered the



researcher may then begin to place participant experiences into certain larger themes that help to develop a “textural description” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78) of what the participants have experienced and a “structural description” (p. 78) of how the participants experienced the phenomenon which, when combined, can lead to an “overall essence of the experience” (p. 78).

**Appropriateness of phenomenology methodology.** Utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach was appropriate for this particular study as it allowed for protocol that included interviews in which the participant’s experiences would be highlighted rather than the researcher’s personal views and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, the interview process allows for a more in-depth understanding and evaluation of faculty and staff who are experts in the realm of first generation student success. By employing bracketing methods, this will help to alleviate the researcher’s own bias and veil of personal experience to allow for a more fresh perspective indicative of the participant’s views and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Strengths.** The aim of this transcendental phenomenological research study is to elucidate best practices in achieving first generation student success upon their transition to college. This particular approach allowed for open-ended questions which could strive to answer the research questions hereby presented in this study by focusing attention “on gathering data that will lead to a textual and structural description of the experiences, and ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.79).

**Weaknesses.** When utilizing a phenomenological approach there are also weaknesses that can arise. Phenomenology warrants a basic comprehension of “the broader philosophical assumptions” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 80) and the researcher must be able to “identify” (p. 80) said assumptions within the study. Furthermore, any participants who are selected to take part in

the study must have been privy to the phenomenon that is the focus of the study which can be challenging depending upon the type of experience the researcher is interested in observing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a researcher, being truly unbiased and recusing one's own comprehension and assumptions can pose a significant challenge as well and requires a deep consideration for how the researcher will join these into the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Research Design**

The design of this transcendental phenomenological study encompasses recognizing the issue of helping first generation students achieve student success upon their transition to college and identifying what population of participants would best be able to offer insight into the best practices for achieving this goal. These steps must be undertaken in conjunction with the collection of data and its analysis to understand the phenomenon presented.

**Analysis unit.** The unit of analysis employed within this study was a higher education faculty or staff member at an institution within the United States. This member must possess at least two years of experience working directly with first generation students in courses, programs, or initiatives directed at helping first generation students be successful on campus.

**Population.** The results found within this study will be applicable to all faculty and staff at higher education institutions who desire to increase the student success of their first generation student population. The study will aim to elucidate best practices for helping first generation students achieve student success during their transition to college and beyond. Results should prove beneficial to faculty and staff who may desire to create new initiatives regarding first generation student success at their own institutions. However, "the study did not employ significance testing. Any generalizations to other populations should be done with caution" (F. Madjidi, personal communication, December 7, 2019).

**Sample size.** An amalgamated group of participants must be selected to be interviewed for the study. Anywhere from three to twenty-five participants who all have had personal experiences with the phenomenon being studied should be chosen (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989). This study called upon fifteen participants to be interviewed which provided a valuable collection of data from which textural and structural descriptions could be developed and formulated to offer insight into best practices for achieving student success for first generation college students (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Purposive sampling.** As a leading sampling strategy in qualitative research studies, purposive sampling was utilized within this study. The participants selected for this study are able to intentionally “inform an understanding” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 326) of not only the problem identified in the research, but also the larger central phenomenon. Participants chosen for this study have keen insight regarding the first generation student population, as well as what strategies are employed to help them be successful students. The insights gathered, while varied, will combine to offer a generalized essence of what first generation student success is comprised of.

**Participant selection.** Selection of participants began by conducting a browser based internet search to determine the most first generation student friendly higher education institutions in the United States. In this study first generation student friendly is defined as institutions which have the highest numbers of matriculated first generation students, as well as institutions with the highest first generation student graduation rates. Institutions appearing in this search were then researched further through their websites to determine if they possessed any first generation student program or initiatives. Once institutions with such criteria were identified, phone calls were placed to contacts listed for the programs and the leaders or

facilitators were identified through these contacts. Once confirmed that the leaders or facilitators had at least two years of experience working with first generation student success initiatives the researcher could continue the procurement process for the participants.

***Sampling frame to create the master list.*** The researcher compiled a master list of participants through an Excel spreadsheet and used the following process:

- For the purposes of privacy and confidentiality the master list was housed on an encrypted laptop which did not leave the researcher's home.
- The researcher applied columns to the spreadsheet for each of the inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that the participants aligned.
- From the master list of participants, fifteen individuals were selected that met both the inclusion and exclusion criteria set forth by the researcher and were considered for the final list.
- The researcher sent a Pepperdine University Institutional Review Board site permission letter to faculty members and requested consent to conduct the semi-structured interview with the participants (See Appendix A).

After the final list of participants was selected via their alignment with the inclusion criteria and disassociated with the exclusion criteria, the researcher further asked the participants to validate their criteria for inclusion before the researcher forged ahead with the study.

***Criteria of inclusion.*** The inclusion criteria for participants set forth by the researcher for this study were as follows:

- Be a higher education faculty or staff member at an institution within the United States.

- Possess at least two years of experience working directly with first generation students in courses, programs, or initiatives directed at helping first generation students be successful on campus.

***Criteria of exclusion.***

- Unable to interview between February 2020 and April 2020.
- Refusal to sign the informed consent.
- Refusal to have the interview recorded.

***Criteria for maximum variation.*** The researcher wanted to attempt to maximize diversity within the sample by including various gender identifications, ages, and ethnicities to gain insight about the phenomenon being studied from as many distinctive viewpoints as possible. Various types of programs, courses, and initiatives for first generation student success were also included through participant experience to enhance the essence and diversity of the study.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Before contacting any of the participants in the study the researcher was required to garner approval from Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board. Upon approval participants were informed of their voluntary participation in the study, as well as their voluntary removal from the study if they so wish. Participants were also informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the process of collecting the data. The researcher also discussed issues of privacy, confidentiality, and protection with the participants while highlighting any potential risks within the study. The possible benefits of participating in the study were communicated to the participants and those who agreed to move forward were asked to complete and sign an informed consent form (See Appendix B). The participants were asked for permission to record the interview and the researcher divulged that any data which was

gained during the course of the interview could be utilized for the purpose of the study research. Furthermore, the participants were questioned in the consent form if the researcher could disclose their identities and the identities of their institutions in the study or if they must remain confidential. Along with the consent form participants were given access to the Interview Protocol ahead of the interview.

Any risk to the participants was minimized in several ways. The participants were advised by the researcher to allow a pseudonym to be used for their identities and the identities of their institutions in the event that they should wish for that information to remain confidential. The researcher explained that no specific identifiers or information would be utilized as part of the study. The researcher also shared with participants that if they did not wish for their identities and the identities of their institutions to be revealed then the researcher would be the sole keeper of this information which would then be destroyed after the completion of the research study. Participants were notified by the researcher that their participation was voluntary and could be terminated at their request at any time. The researcher also discussed the lack of known risks to the participants, as well as the high level of confidentiality that would be upheld. The participants were also informed that they would have access to the results of the study at its completion if they wished to review them.

The researcher digitally recorded and transcribed the content of the interviews. The data collected was recorded in a way that allowed for participants to be identified by a name or a code to ensure confidentiality. While the informed consent form offered participants the option to allow their names to be disclosed in the study, if they did not consent, their names and identifiers were interchanged with a generic title and reference to their higher education institution. The

only area in which an indication of the participant's name appeared was on the researcher's coding sheet that was available only to the researcher.

The researcher's finished, final transcriptions of the participant interviews were completed successfully without revealing any of the identities of participants who did not consent to having their identities revealed. The interview transcriptions are stored and maintained within a secure, locked cabinet in the researcher's home residence and will be kept for the duration of five years. The researcher's coding sheet which contained identifying information for the participants was destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher compiled a master list of thirty possible participants that met the inclusion criteria for the study. Utilizing a standard recruitment script (See Appendix C), the researcher made phone calls to the participants to gauge their interest in participating in the study while explaining the rationale behind it. If the participants assented to participating in the study, the researcher followed up with an email which went over the nature of the study, offered the informed consent form, and arranged a time to set up the interview. The participants who agreed to be a part of the study signed and returned their consent forms to the researcher. After the interview had taken place, the researcher contacted the participants via email to thank them for their time and consideration.

### **Interview Techniques**

The researcher employed semi-structured interviews to collect the data utilized in this study. The goal of the semi-structured interview is to provide a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied by "gathering data that will lead to a textual and structural description" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79) of the participant's various experiences. The open-

ended nature of the questions asked within the interview allow for the participants to elaborate on their experiences and give greater context in their explanation. The information presented to the researcher by the participants was fruitful in offering valuable insight into the collective experiences of higher education faculty and staff who are experts in achieving first generation student success.

### **Interview Protocol**

The researcher employed the semi-structured interview method to gather data for this phenomenological research study as it allowed for open-ended questions that gave the participant's ample opportunity to discuss their experiences in-depth. The interview questions for this study were as follows:

- IQ 1. What do you offer on campus that is directed at first generation student success?
- IQ 2. How do you encourage student success in first generation students on campus?
- IQ 3. What resources do you believe are under-utilized by first generation students that would enhance their student success?
- IQ 4. What challenges do you believe first generation students face on campus that inhibit their student success?
- IQ 5. How would you define first generation student success?
- IQ 6. How do you measure first generation student success? What does that look like?
- IQ 7. How do you track success? When do you evolve?



- IQ 8. How can higher education institutions best support first generation student success?
- IQ 9. What mistakes have you made that you would warn other higher education institutions to avoid when building first generation student success?
- IQ 10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Relationship between research and interview questions.** The interview protocol employed for this study utilized open-ended interview questions that corresponded to larger overarching research questions. Four research questions were utilized for the purpose of this study. A total of ten interview questions were assigned to the research questions with research questions 1 and 2 consisting of two interview questions each and research questions 3 and 4 consisting of three interview questions each. The research and interview questions were designed based upon the review of literature and offered participants the opportunity to elaborate on their own experiences without strict boundaries surrounding the questions. The researcher constructed a table to better illustrate the connections between the research questions and their corresponding interview questions (See Table 1).

Table 1.

*Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions*

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions
RQ1: What strategies are used by higher education institutions to increase first generation student success?	<p>IQ 1: What do you offer on campus that is directed at first generation student success?</p> <p>IQ 2: How do you encourage student success in first generation students on campus?</p>

(continued)

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions
RQ 2: What challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success?	<p>IQ 3: What resources do you believe are under-utilized by first generation students that would enhance their student success?</p> <p>IQ 4: What challenges do you believe first generation students face on campus that inhibit their student success?</p>
RQ3: How do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success?	<p>IQ 5: How would you define first generation student success?</p> <p>IQ 6: How do you measure first generation student success? What does that look like?</p> <p>IQ 7: How do you track success? When do you evolve?</p>
RQ4: What recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students?	<p>IQ 8: How can higher education institutions best support first generation student success?</p> <p>IQ 9: What mistakes have you made that you would warn other higher education institutions to avoid when building first generation student success?</p> <p>IQ 10: Is there anything else you would like to add?</p>

*Note. The table identifies four research questions and corresponding interview questions. Interview questions were reviewed by a panel of two peer-reviewers and expert reviewers.*

**Validity of the study.** To attempt a high level of validity this research study employed several different methods including peer and expert review. By having an external party examine the research and interview questions, the researcher can receive valuable insight and feedback

that could warrant more valuable data while “keeping the researcher honest” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 263). Further attempts were made to increase validity and reliability by reporting all components of the design study, discussing the researcher’s personal bias, gathering data through methods that have been thoroughly vetted, gathering strong, robust amounts of data, and constructing a replicable study that could be performed by other researchers.

***Prima-facie and content validity.*** The interview questions developed by the researcher were influenced primarily by the research conducted throughout the literature review. The interview questions also sought to more deeply expand upon the research questions to obtain data that would be beneficial for the study. Revisions were made after peer review was conducted to assess the validity of the content contained in the interview questions. The revisions helped to ensure that the interview questions were poised to gather the most relevant and beneficial data possible (See Table 2).

Table 2.

*Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions (Revised)*

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions
RQ1: What strategies are used by higher education institutions to increase first generation student success?	<p>IQ 1: What effective programs or resources are offered on campus that are directed at ensuring success for first generation students?</p> <p>IQ 2: How do you encourage students to participate in programs or resources offered on campus that are directed at ensuring first generation student success?</p>

(continued)

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions
<p>RQ 2: What challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success?</p>	<p>IQ 3: What resources do you believe are under-utilized by first generation students that would enhance their student success?</p> <p>IQ 4: What challenges do you believe first generation students face on campus that inhibit their student success?</p>
<p>RQ3: How do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success?</p>	<p>IQ 5: How would you define first generation student success?</p> <p>IQ 6: How do you measure first generation student success? What does that look like?</p> <p>IQ 7: How do you track success? When do you evolve?</p>
<p>RQ4: What recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students?</p>	<p>IQ 8: What recommendations do you have for higher education institutions to support first generation success?</p> <p>IQ 9: What mistakes have you made that you would warn other higher education institutions to avoid when building first generation student success?</p> <p>IQ 10: Is there anything else you would like to add?</p>

Table 2.0.

*Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions (Revised).*

<b><i>Research Questions</i></b>	<b><i>Corresponding Interview Questions</i></b>
RQ1: What strategies are used by higher education institutions to increase first generation student success?	<p>IQ 1: How can higher education institutions best support success for first generation students?</p> <p>IQ 2: What programs, services or resources are provided for first generation students?</p> <p>IQ 3: How do you encourage first generation students to participate?</p>
RQ 2: What challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success?	<p>IQ 4: What challenges or difficulties do you face to get first generation students to participate in or use resources?</p> <p>IQ 5: What challenges do first generation students face that hinder their success?</p>

(continued)

<i>Research Questions</i>	<i>Corresponding Interview Questions</i>
RQ3: How do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success?	<p>IQ 6: How would you define first generation student success?</p> <p>IQ 7: How do you measure first generation student success? What does that look like?</p> <p>IQ 8: How do you track success? When do you evolve?</p>
RQ4: What recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students?	<p>IQ 9: Are there strategies you've employed to support first generation students that you would not reuse?</p> <p>IQ 10: Do you have any advice for faculty who are engaged in facilitating success for first generation students?</p>

Note: The table identifies four research questions and corresponding interview questions with revisions based on feedback from peer-reviewers and an expert reviewer. Subsequent changes were made to the order and phrasing of questions within the interview protocol.

**Peer-review validity.** The researcher employed another level of validity by seeking out peer reviewers who could inspect the research questions and corresponding interview questions to determine their relevance and quality. Peer reviewers are knowledgeable about the process and

are able to ask questions that require a deeper level of thought regarding how a question could be interpreted or another meaning could be determined (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Peer reviewers also serve as a sounding board for the researcher's thoughts and feelings regarding the study and can offer support and insight as to the best practice for forging onward (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Two doctoral student peer reviewers were supplied with the researcher's original research and interview questions, as well as duplicate pages on which they could make their revisions. The reviewers were tasked with marking the questions as acceptable with no revisions, adding recommended revisions on questions they felt were not well-aligned with the research questions, or deleting questions that did not fit the research questions and were not useful (See Appendix D). Revisions were then taken into account by the researcher and incorporated as the researcher felt necessary.

***Expert review validity.*** A culmination of upholding the validity of the study was to employ a phase of expert level review. In the event that a consensus could not be reached between the researcher and the peer reviewers, this step offered further insight and critique. If the researcher was hesitant to accept the feedback given regarding revisions from the participating peer reviewers the expert reviewers were asked to provide their own insights and were able to give a final input to ensure that the interview questions aligned with the research questions as closely as possible and would be fruitful for data collection in the study. The peer reviewers had several small changes that they suggested in terms of phrasing to clarify and elucidate any confusion in the interview questions. These suggestions were discussed between the researcher and the peer reviewers with explanation given by the reviewers for why the critiques were given. The researcher agreed with, and employed the reviewer's suggestions in several of the interview questions to enhance the clarity. The expert committee was employed to review the interview

questions after the peer review process. Discussion between the researcher and the expert committee occurred in which the committee offered insight into different possible interpretations of the interview questions and suggested modifications which could provide more clarity to the interview process. The researcher readily accepted these modifications and incorporated them into the study (See Table 2.0 *Revised*).

**Reliability of the study.** During and after research studies, researchers are often concerned with accuracy of their study and the questions that it has answered along with asking if there even is a correct answer (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers must examine their own lens, as well as listening to the participants and readers or reviewers of the study, taking all discourses into consideration to ensure reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition to keeping documentation of all processes completed throughout the study, the researcher must possess a robust and detailed protocol for interviews and coding procedures. Employing intercoding procedures using multiple coders is another level of reliability that diffuses the researcher's own influence and leads to a more moderated coding process.

### **Statement of Personal Bias**

Though the researcher may possess their own experiences related to the phenomenon being studied, they must not allow these preconceptions and biases to overshadow or influence the validity and reliability of the study during the interview process and further into the analysis of the data collected.

**Bracketing and epoche.** In order to alleviate personal bias the researcher relied on the processes of bracketing and epoche in this study. Researchers will often bracket themselves out of the study at hand by divulging what they have experienced regarding the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This act allows for the researcher to put aside their own preconceptions



and instead turn their attention to the participant's being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Epoche allows for a clearing of the researcher's mind and leaving behind the researcher's personal conceptions as "indicators of knowledge, meaning, and truth" (Moerer-Urdahl, & Creswell, 2004, p. 22). This researcher was able to reflect on her own personal experiences with friends who were first generation students striving for success in college and the challenges they experienced.

Growing up in a small, rural Appalachian town, attending a higher education institution was not readily accepted as a logical next step after high school for many of this researcher's classmates. It was not uncommon for the researcher to hear parents and other adults within the community devaluing the attendance of college. The researcher saw many classmates and friends struggle with the decision of whether or not to attend college, as well as how to navigate the process of application and whether or not the option was affordable. For those who did succeed in attending college, the researcher noted many individuals who dropped out due to lack of funds or preparedness, along with those who found the environment far more challenging than they had anticipated. Using the process of bracketing in a journal this researcher allowed her mind entry to judgements and preconceptions while utilizing reflective meditation to sort through the memories of first generation student experiences she had. Once she had acknowledged these remembrances, she was able to place them aside and focus more fully on the participant's experiences without the pollution of personal judgements.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was gathered from fifteen interviews for the purposes of understanding best practices that higher education faculty and staff employ to achieve first generation student success on campus. First, the researcher listened to the conducted interviews multiple times and

transcribed them verbatim. Next, memoing was employed in this study and the researcher made notes as she analyzed the data gathered within the transcripts, attempting to structure the process and map out the trajectory of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher also proofread the transcriptions multiple times to ensure that the information presented was accurate and understandable.

Moving forward, using an Excel spreadsheet to organize the coding, the researcher then began the coding process by identifying key concepts in the transcripts surrounding first generation student success methods and challenges experienced by first generation students and higher education faculty and staff who work with this population. Within the spreadsheet the researcher constructed separate columns for each research question that allowed for the division of similar concepts by what research question they fell under and by frequency of the concepts identified. The researcher then divided the concepts by further codifying them into meaningful keywords and themes. From this juncture, the keywords and themes were clustered into categories with similar structures (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Utilizing open coding procedures allowed for the labeling of varying and different concepts, as well as the organization process of grouping the determined concepts into categories that were alike in nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher sought out patterns that emerged within the memoing process that later served to build themes and concepts that eventually were employed as categories with which to organize and better understand the data gathered.

**Interrater reliability and validity.** This study employed interrater reliability to enhance the validity of the project. Since the coding process can be incredibly subjective researchers often rely on interraters in order to offer an additional check and alleviate any biases the researcher might be harboring (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this process the researcher recruited

three Organizational Leadership doctoral students within Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology who were well versed in the qualitative research process and could offer valuable insights during the coding procedures. After the researcher had finished conducting all interviews, she transcribed and coded the first three interviews. The student co-raters were given access to the researcher's spreadsheet containing the preliminary coding of the first three interview transcripts to begin the process of reaching consensus. The co-raters then examined the transcripts and the requisite coding the researcher had employed and offered their feedback. If the co-raters were satisfied with the researcher's themes, the researcher did not employ revisions. However, if the co-raters offered feedback and revisions, the researchers took them into consideration for revisions. In the event that there was disagreement between the researcher and the co-raters, the dissertation committee was called upon to offer insight and guidance. After the initial three interviews were reviewed, the researcher returned to transcribing and coding the remaining twelve interviews. After completion of this step, the remaining interviews and subsequent coding were again sent to the co-raters for consensus. Agreement between the co-raters and the researcher was necessary to ensure the most reliable and valid outcome. Again, if consensus could not be reached at any point, the expert panel was asked to intervene and offer feedback. At the conclusion of the exercise, the researcher requested that the co-raters delete any and all documentation related to the study from their devices. The process of inter-coding was well documented to be accurately represented within the results of the study.

### **Chapter 3 Summary**

Chapter 3 offers a comprehensive and extensive examination of the research design, methodology, and techniques for conducting valid and reliable qualitative research. Beginning with a re-introduction of the research questions and methodology, the chapter continues by

discussing the analysis unit that will be studied along with the population that the study will be most beneficial to. IRB and the protection of human subjects was examined in regard to upholding the highest levels of confidentiality and privacy possible in this study. The process for finalizing the interview protocol including the peer review employed for validity was discussed in conjunction with the methods employed for collecting data. Finally, the chapter divulged the process behind the transcription and interrater reliability methods which were utilized to enhance the validity and reliability of the coding procedures to ensure that data was accurately represented. Chapter 4 will proceed with a discussion on the analysis of the data collected.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

Attempting to understand the challenges and obstacles faced by first generation students on higher education campuses is a complex process. First generation college students experience more difficulties in acclimating and transitioning to a higher education environment than their multi-generational counterparts which can increase feelings of disillusionment when faced with seemingly insurmountable hindrances (Terenzini et al., 1996). In an effort to better understand the issues that first generation students face, this study gathered higher education faculty and staff experts in the field of first generation student success with the goal of learning how to overcome these issues, as well as best practices for achieving first generation student success. The study strived to answer the following four research questions geared toward first generation student success:

RQ1: What strategies are used by higher education institutions to increase first generation student success?

RQ2: What challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success?

RQ3: How do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success?

RQ4: What recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students?

In conjunction with the above four research questions, the study employed a ten question interview protocol which was delivered to the participants of the study complete with inter-rater reliability and validity procedures in place. The interview questions were as follows:

1. How can higher education institutions best support success for first generation students?

2. What programs, services or resources are provided for first generation students?
3. How do you encourage first generation students to participate?
4. What challenges or difficulties do you face to get first generation students to participate in or use resources?
5. What challenges do first generation students face that hinder their success?
6. How would you define first generation student success?
7. How do you measure first generation success? What does that look like?
8. How do you track success? When do you evolve?
9. Are there strategies you've employed to support first generation students that you would not reuse?
10. Do you have any advice for faculty who are engaged in facilitating success for first generation students?

The participants taking part in the study were asked to answer the ten open-ended interview questions to the best of their ability and based off of their own observations and experiences at their respective higher education institutions. The data retrieved from the participant responses offered a wealth of information regarding not only the challenges that first generation students face on campus, but how to help the population overcome these challenges and the best practices for aiding them achieve student success. The following chapter will detail more about the participants and the data collection process that yielded results relating to the best practices for achieving first generation student success. The inter-rater reliability and validity process will be outlined in addition to the findings of the study that were coded into themes which reflect the data gathered.

## **Participants**

For this study, fifteen individuals were chosen to participate in the interview protocol. The participants were selected from varying geographic locations and represented a diverse range of higher education institutions in size, affiliation, and academic ranking. Of the participants, eight, or 53% were female, and seven, or 46% were male. At the conclusion of the study, the data that was collected and coded reflected data saturation by indicating a repetition of similar themes in participant answers.

## **Data Collection**

The selection of participants for the study included an internet search in order to determine the most first generation student friendly higher education institutions in the United States, which are defined in this study as institutions which have the highest numbers of matriculated first generation students, as well as institutions with the highest first generation student graduation rates. Potential participants were selected from these institutions given their involvement in programs on initiatives directed at first generation student success. Once identified, potential participants were contacted via phone or email to gauge their willingness to participate in the study. The researcher compiled a master list of participants through an Excel spreadsheet with columns applied for each of the inclusion and exclusion criteria to affirm that the potential participants were eligible for the study. Once the master list was constructed fifteen potential participants were chosen that met both the criteria for inclusion and exclusion while taking maximum variation into consideration.

The study's data collection began in late February 2020 after receiving full approval from IRB on February 24, 2020 and concluded on March 11, 2020. Each participant was contacted by phone or email. After a brief introduction, the researcher outlined the purpose of the study and

asked the individual if they would be willing to participate. In the event that the participant agreed to an interview, the research collected contact information from the participant and proceeded to schedule an interview at the participant's convenience (see Table 3). Participants were emailed the informed consent form and the study's interview questions in advance of the interview and were instructed to contact the researcher if they had any questions or concerns regarding the study. Participants remained anonymous throughout the study. The participant interviews were conducted with no issues with each interview lasting, on average, about 40 minutes. At the conclusion of the interviews the participants were thanked and a thank you email was sent to them.

Table 3.

*Dates of the Participant Interviews*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Interview Date</b>
P1	February 26, 2020
P2	February 26, 2020
P3	February 27, 2020
P4	February 27, 2020
P5	March 2, 2020
P6	March 3, 2020
P7	March 3, 2020
P8	March 5, 2020

(continued)



<b>Participant</b>	<b>Interview Date</b>
P9	March 6, 2020
P10	March 6, 2020
P11	March 7, 2020
P12	March 9, 2020
P13	March 10, 2020
P14	March 10, 2020
P15	March 11, 2020

## **Data Analysis**

After conclusion of the participant interviews, this qualitative, phenomenological study required coding of the data to take place. The researcher examined the data gathered from the interviews, analyzed the results, and inductively coded the participant responses with the goal of interpreting the data in such a way as to answer the questions put forth by the study. The researcher utilized an Android phone application to record the participant interviews for later transcription. The researcher also took notes during each interview in order to reflect on each interview experience. In order to offer an unbiased approach, the researcher engaged in epoche, or bracketing, negate the researcher's own personal experiences and separate them from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By utilizing a personal notebook detailing biased thoughts and personal observations and experiences regarding first generation student experience, the researcher could create an uncluttered mental space in which to engage with the participants more fully and authentically and analyze their responses.

The audio recordings collected from the interviews were then transcribed onto a google document by the researcher for ease of reading. The researcher then read each transcription

multiple times making comments in the margins to begin preliminary coding. After the transcriptions were thoroughly reviewed, the researcher created a google spreadsheet in order to organize participant answers. Each response given by a participant was reviewed by the researcher and compared against other participant responses with the goal of finding commonalities between the responses. As similarities were identified, the responses were grouped into codes. The researcher then gathered the codes into larger overarching themes that served as an umbrella for similar codes. The themes within each interview question were then tallied to analyze their prevalence and given descriptive names that encompassed the intricacies of each code included within them.

### **Inter-Rater Review Process**

For the purpose of data validation, two Pepperdine University Doctoral students within the Graduate School of Education and Psychology's EDOL program were employed to review the researcher's coding procedures. To begin, the doctoral students were given access to the researcher's results collected from the first three interviews organized on a google spreadsheet. The spreadsheet reflected the responses collected and initial coding, as well as the color coded groupings that the researcher had made that became the larger themes. The students were also given access to the researcher's interview questions for reference. After reviewing the results from the initial three interviews, suggestions were given to the researcher who, in turn, took the suggestions into consideration. After completion of the final 12 interviews, the doctoral students were again given access to the google spreadsheet with the researcher's results, codes, and themes. Further suggestions were offered by the inter-raters and taken into serious consideration by the researcher who employed several of the recommendations (see Table 4).

Table 4.

*Inter-rater Coding Table Edit Recommendations*

Interview Question	Items	Inter-rater Recommendations	Modification Applied
1	Number of themes	Condense number of themes	Reduced number of themes from seven to five
2	Theme: Clubs & Groups	Change to Peer Support Groups	Changed to Peer Clubs & Groups
3	Theme: Incentives	Change to Social & Financial Incentives	Changed Theme to Social & Financial Incentives
4	Theme: Emotional Factors	Change to be more specific	Changed Theme to Student Emotional Responses

**Data Display**

Data collected for the purpose of this study is catalogued in accordance with the study's research questions and relevant interview questions. During the construction of the response coding and eventually theme configuration, the number of responses that fell within each theme was calculated. Bar charts detailing these calculations offered, not only a visual aid in examining the data, but also a concise summary of the study's results. Direct, participant quotes regarding each theme were also utilized to further elaborate on the data and bring personalization to the numerical outcomes displayed. In order to adhere to the strict regulations of confidentiality, the researcher referred to each participant numerically when quoting them. For example the first

participant interviewed is referred to as Participant 1 or P1. The results of the study follow in the next section.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research questions centered on asking, what strategies are used by higher education institutions to increase first generation student success? To answer this question, three interview questions were employed.

IQ 1: How can higher education institutions best support success for first generation students?

IQ 2: What programs, services or resources are provided for first generation students?

IQ 3: How do you encourage first generation students to participate?

Participant answers collected for these three interview questions were coded into themes that aided in answering RQ1.

**Interview Question 1.** How can higher education institutions best support success for first generation students? This question yielded five themes: Providing First Generation Specific Resources, Holistic Understanding of Population's Needs, Knowledge Sharing & Clear Communication, Mentorship, Identify & Track Trends (see Figure 1).

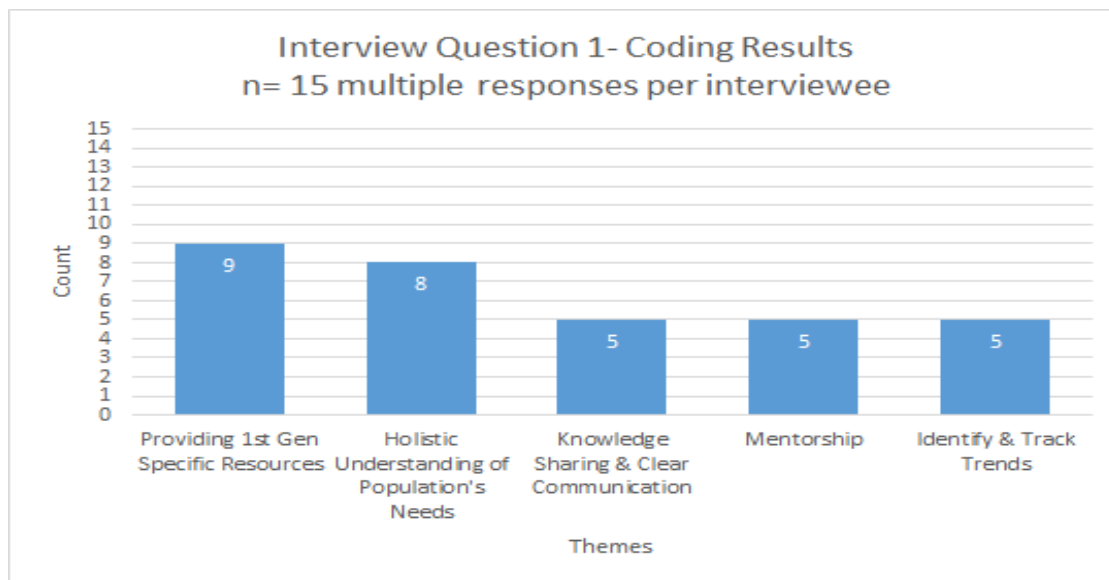


Figure 1. IQ1: How can higher education institutions best support success for first generation students?

***Providing 1st gen specific resources.*** The first interview question regarding how higher education institutions can best support success for first generation students yielded five themes. The first theme, providing first generation student specific resources was noted by nine (60%) of the participants. The theme encompassed offering academic resources, summer bridge programs, specific programming, funding first generation programs, and creating an infrastructure to support first generation students. P2 noted, “On campus, within the last couple years, the creation of the Student Success Center provides things like workshops and career readiness events, tutoring, and mentoring for first generation students.”

***Holistic understanding of population’s needs.*** The second theme that was displayed in the first interview question was having a holistic understanding of the first generation population’s needs. Eight (53%) participants offered answers in this theme which ranged from understanding first generation student characteristics and acknowledging the challenges they face, to looking beyond GPA and academics, as well as being inclusive, understanding, and not making assumptions. P4 answered, “It’s a significant population so having an understanding of

those characteristics is really crucial because if you don't understand who they are then I'm not sure how you're going to align the services to have a positive effect on them to help them towards graduation."

***Knowledge sharing & clear communication.*** Being focused on knowledge sharing and practicing clear communication was the third theme that emerged in the study. Five (33%) participants gave answers relating to this theme which included avoiding acronyms, evaluating messaging, educating families, and explaining college terminology. P1 said "You know, in higher education we speak in a different language, we just do things because that's how it's been done a lot of times, and I think you really have to step back and evaluate your messaging, what you're doing, what you're sending out and how it comes out to those students and their families."

***Mentorship.*** Mentorship was the fourth theme that appeared within the study with 5 (33%) participants noting its importance. The theme included both peer and faculty mentorship, as well as mentorship programs for first generation students. P9 offered, "Mentorship killed so many birds with one stone, I mean, first of all, you're building relationships and you know, that cultivates a sense of community that also brings about a sense of belonging for students and a sense of belonging is a key indicator for successful first generation students."

***Identify & track trends.*** The fifth and final theme in the first interview question was focused on identifying and tracking trends for first generation students. Five (33%) participants noted the importance of this theme which included tracking outcomes for students, identifying the growth rate of first generation students on campus, and identifying trends within the population. P2 made the point, "I mean just track different outcomes for first generation students and then, you know, wherever they are lacking or not meeting, you know standards of other groups of student populations, then providing those resources to fill those gaps."

**Interview question 2.** What programs, services or resources are provided for first generation students? This interview question yielded six themes: Skill Building Services, Mentor Programs, Cohort Based Curriculum, Scholarship, Summer Bridge Programs, and Peer Clubs & Groups (see Figure 2).

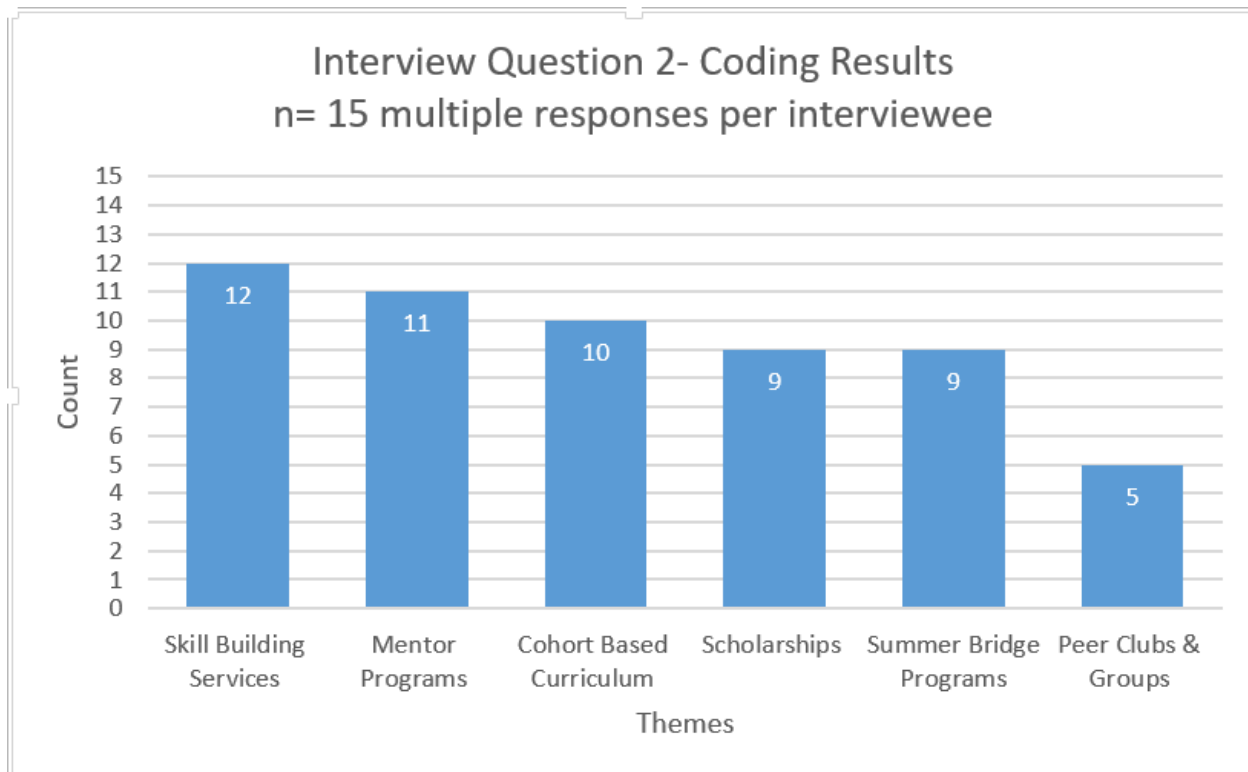


Figure 2. IQ2: What programs, services or resources are provided for first generation students?

**Skill building services.** The first theme that emerged in the second interview question was skill building services which included labels like student success centers, skill development courses, information workshops, and a first generation student manual with tips and tricks on how to be successful in college. In answering this question, 12 (80%) participants noted the importance of providing skill building services for first generation students. P11 offered, “Our student success center also has a number of resources to offer first generation students in the way of different tutoring sessions and different skill building sessions.”

***Mentor programs.*** Mentor programs were mentioned as the second theme under interview question 2. Mentor programs encompassed answers such as faculty and staff mentoring, peer mentoring, and weekly lunches with faculty for mentorship opportunities. Of the participants, 11 (73%) mentioned the importance of mentorship for first generation students. P14 praised mentorship by saying, “So we have second, third, and fourth year students signing on to mentor first year, first generation students so that somebody who has been through the challenge of learning how to navigate the campus with their riches, it’s abundant.”

***Cohort based curriculum.*** Having a cohort based curriculum for first generation students was the third theme that appeared in the research. This theme included mentions of cohorts, having a co-curricular sphere, cohort communities, and cohort bonding activities. Out of the participants, 10 (66%) said that cohort based curriculums were very helpful in generating first generation student success. P8 noted, “Once students are part of the first generation cohort, they have to live communally in a residence hall and it provides wraparound services for students like orientation and how to manage financial aid.”

***Scholarships.*** Offering scholarships for first generation students was the fourth theme that was elucidated. The theme included, scholarships, grants, financial aid, and funding for incidentals. Nine (60%) participants spoke about the necessity of scholarships. P9 explained, “There are several scholarships that first generation students get and then there’s also a necessity fund where students can apply as much as they want, there’s no limit to how many times they can apply, so that covers you know, medical bills, dental bills, medication, and psychiatry visits, all those things that are necessities and emergencies.”

***Summer bridge programs.*** The fifth theme that developed was summer bridge programs which included mentions of pre-orientation summer programs, early move-in for first generation



students, and first generation transitioning programs. Nine (60%) of participants discussed how summer bridge programs had a positive impact on first generation student success. P4 offered, “Overall summer bridge programs are supposed to provide a transitional experience for freshmen that will incorporate an academic component in combination with courses available to them that help them understand and solidify their identity as underrepresented students.”

***Peer clubs & groups.*** The final theme that arose for interview question 2 was peer clubs and groups. Elements in this theme included, a first generation honor society, first generation clubs, and groups that celebrate diversity. Five (33%) participants spoke of the importance of peer clubs and groups that support first generation students. P5 said “We have a first generation honor society and are designated as a first forward institution that just puts us on a list of colleges and universities nationwide that essentially shows that we put a little bit of extra effort into supporting our first gen students.”

**Interview question 3.** How do you encourage first generation students to participate? This interview question yielded five themes: Offering Peer & Community Engagement, Enhancing Student Accessibility & Comfortability, Social & Financial Incentives, Utilizing Varied Outreach Methods, and Mandatory Participation (see Figure 3).

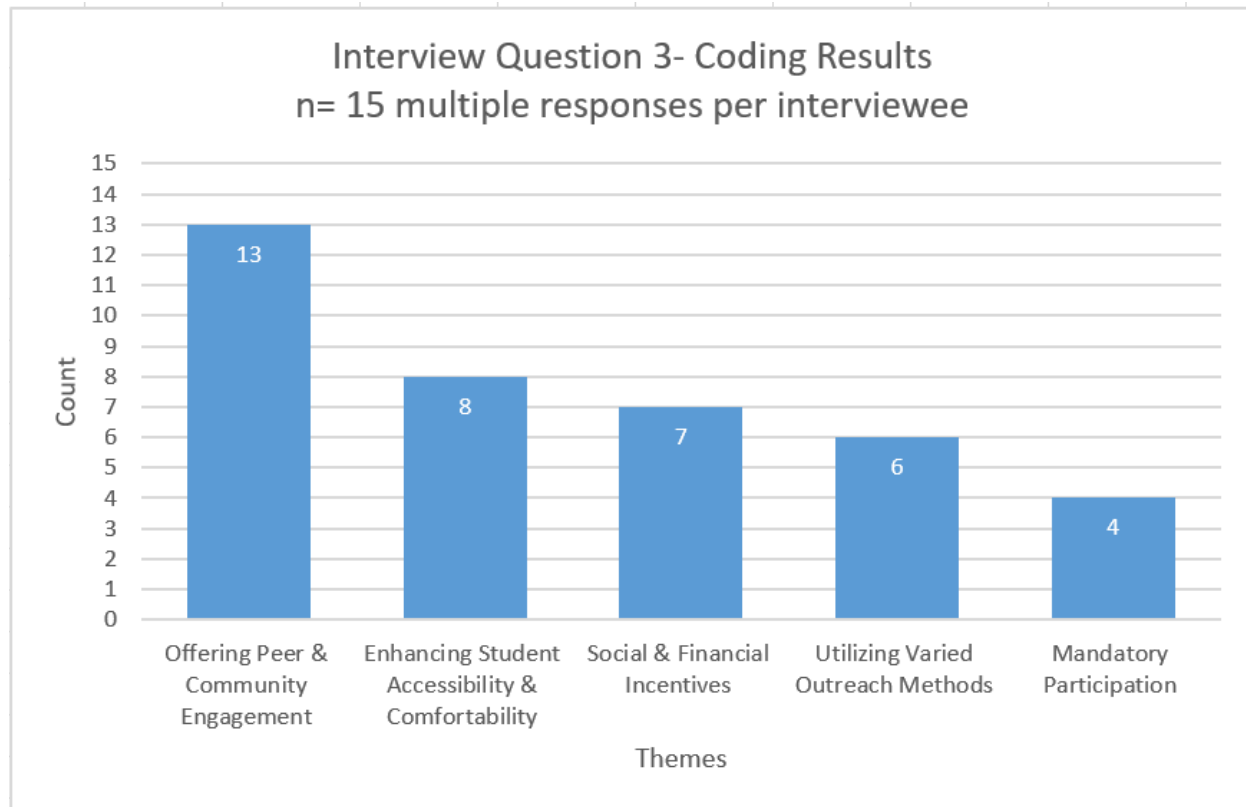


Figure 3. IQ3: How do you encourage first generation students to participate?

***Offering peer & community engagement.*** The first theme to emerge in interview question 3 was offering peer and community engagement to first generation students. This theme included mentions of building community, peer mentor engagement, individually connecting with students, connecting with students early and often, and faculty interaction time. Of the participants, 13 (86%) said that offering peer and community engagement was successful in encouraging first generation students to participate. P15 noted that, “We do a lot of collaboration with our undergraduate admissions partners, we do different welcome and mix and mingle type events just to bring students to the space and once they’re in the space, then they can better connect and understand what we do.”

***Enhancing student accessibility & comfortability.*** The second notable theme that appeared in interview question 3 was enhancing student accessibility and comfortability which included labels such as, asking students to join you at events, alleviating stress of getting to events, convenient timing, lessening group anxiety, and building trust with students. Eight (53%) participants pointed to enhancing student accessibility and comfortability as an important part of encouraging first generation student participation. P10 vouched, “I would say a lot of it from what I’ve found, what I realized is building trust with the students and find ways to support their current programs. They can call me by name and tell me exactly what they want and what they need because they’ve seen that I’m invested in their community.”

***Social & financial incentives.*** Offering social and financial incentives was the third theme to emerge in the research. This theme included elements like giving out swag, free food, prizes, and scholarships. Seven (46%) of the participants noted that offering social and financial incentives was a large draw for first generation students. P11 elucidated on the theme by saying, “We offer incentives such as different prizes and food.” while P2 noted, “Different swag items tend to be an incentive.”

***Utilizing varied outreach methods.*** Attempting to utilize varied methods of outreach was the fourth theme under interview question 3. This theme covered aspects such as, email marketing, faculty and staff promotion, creating brand recognition for programs, and social media outreach. Out of the participants, six (40%) spoke of using different methods of outreach to encourage students to participate. P15 said, “Part of it is, you know, just creating that brand recognition within our division and within our area and, but we all go about it in unique ways. We do a lot of social media outreach.”

***Mandatory participation.*** The final theme in interview question 3 was mandatory participation for first generation students. This theme encompassed components like, making contracts with students, mandatory attendance, and a mandatory checklist of items to complete. Four (26%) participants mentioned requiring first generation students to participate in certain activities or programs. P4 offered, “So we go over a contract with them to say this is what our program is going to do and strive to do and these are the expectations we have if you’re going to become a student and if you agree with this then go ahead and sign it.”

**Research question 1 summary.** The focus of research question one was to elucidate what strategies are used by high education institutions to increase first generation student success. Participants shared that higher education institutions can best support first generation student success by providing population specific resources, sharing knowledge, communicating clearly, and holistically understanding the population’s needs. Furthermore, institutions are offering skill building services, mentor programs, and cohort based curriculums on their campus to engage first generation students in utilizing resources. To encourage students to participate, interviewees answered that offering peer and community engagement, as well as social and financial incentives can go a long way in making students feel more comfortable participating in programs and resources directed at them.

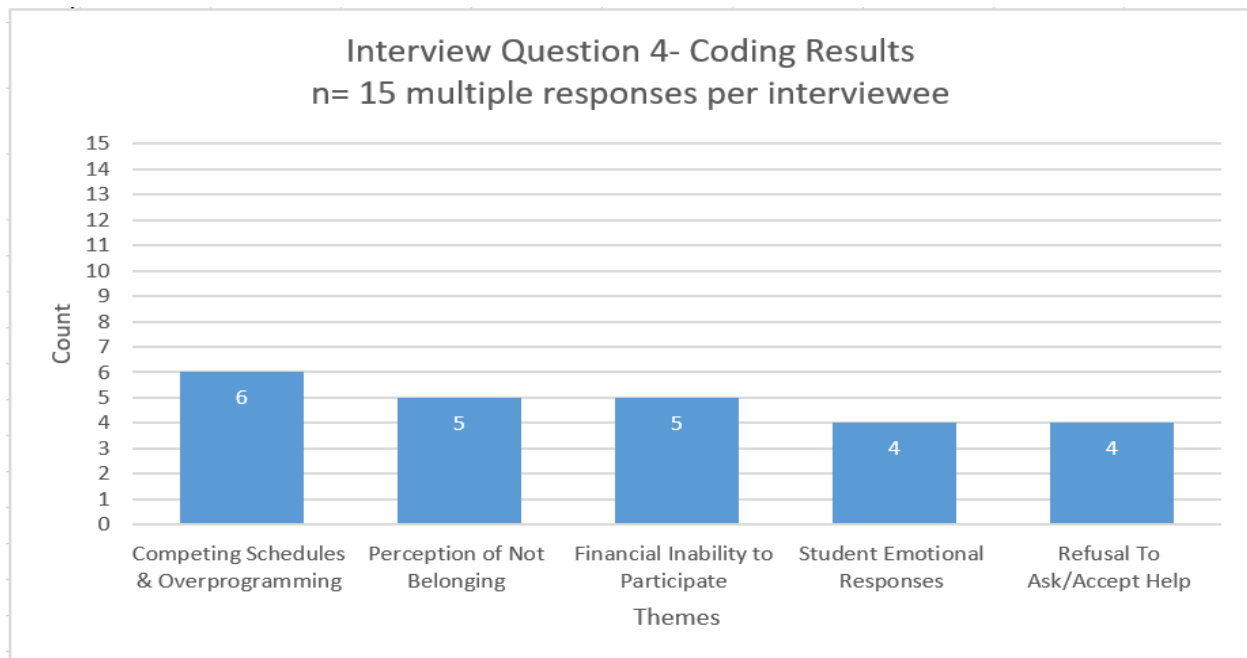
## **Research Question 2**

Research question 2 wondered, what challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success? Two interview questions were compiled in order to gather data for research question 2:

1. What challenges or difficulties do you face to get first generation students to participate in or use resources?

2. What challenges do first generation students face that hinder their success?

**Interview question 4.** What challenges or difficulties do you face to get first generation students to participate in or use resources? Interview question 4 materialized five themes: competing schedules & over programming, perception of not belonging, financial inability to participate, and refusal to ask/accept help (see Figure 4).



*Figure 4.* IQ4: What challenges or difficulties do you face to get first generation students to participate in or use resources?

***Competing schedules & over programming.*** The first theme to emerge from interview question 4 was competing schedules and over programming of first generation students. Labels under this theme included, students not wanting to be over-contacted, time commitment is too much, students being over-saturated, and competing schedules. Six (40%) participants noted that this theme is a major difficulty in getting first generation students to participate and to use resources on campus. P10 said, “So at this institution, you can count on maybe like 50%

attending an event because there's so much programming going on around industry, academics, and you know, I feel like there's just like a lot that is constantly being provided for students because this is a very decentralized campus."

***Perception of not belonging.*** The second theme to appear was the perception of not belonging. This theme encompassed feeling isolated or different, imposter syndrome, and don't feel like they belong. Five (33%) participants said that having a perception of not belonging is a challenge in getting first generation students to participate. P5 explained, "A lot of my work has been kind of how do we make our first gen students feel like they belong, to kind of alleviate that imposter syndrome?"

***Financial inability to participate.*** The third theme that arose in interview question 4 was financial inability to participate. Elements that fell under this theme were, financial difficulty and financial inability. Five (33%) of the participants spoke of first generation student's inability to pay for resources or programs as a deterrent for their participation. P7 offered, "I think my experience is more complex when we bring in the intersection of socioeconomic status into that first gen experience in really complex ways because when we talk about first gen students, we're talking about identifying students who have really significant socioeconomic barriers." P12 further stated, "It's a residential campus so your roommate or the person across the hall could be from a very wealthy family and invite you to go to something and say hey we're doing this, this, and this and you're the one that can't go because you don't have those types of funds."

***Student emotional responses.*** Theme four arose as student emotional responses and included stress about participating, intimidation, fear, and student shyness. Four (26%) participants said that students often let emotional responses impede their participation in resources and programs designed for them. In getting first generation students to come to events,

P1 noted, “You know, the two ways to get from campus to campus at our institution if you’re not used to any type of public transportation can be very overwhelming, or just walking into the busy student center, so the big thing is getting people across campus to say hey why don’t you join me and come with me.”

***Refusal to ask/accept help.*** The final theme in interview question 4 was refusal to ask/accept help. Elements of this theme showed, students don’t think they need help, too independent, and a stigma of asking for help. Four (26%) of the participants mentioned first generation student’s reluctance or avoidance of asking for help. P6 explained, “I think there’s kind of that not wanting to ask for help, if there are support services that are more considered like helping you since often they tell us about not wanting to see out help and there’s kind of a stigma around that.”

**Interview question 5.** What challenges do first generation students face that hinder their success? Themes included: belonging & mental health, lack of finances & resources, lack of knowledge, lack of family support, and identifying as a member of multiple minority groups (see Figure 5).

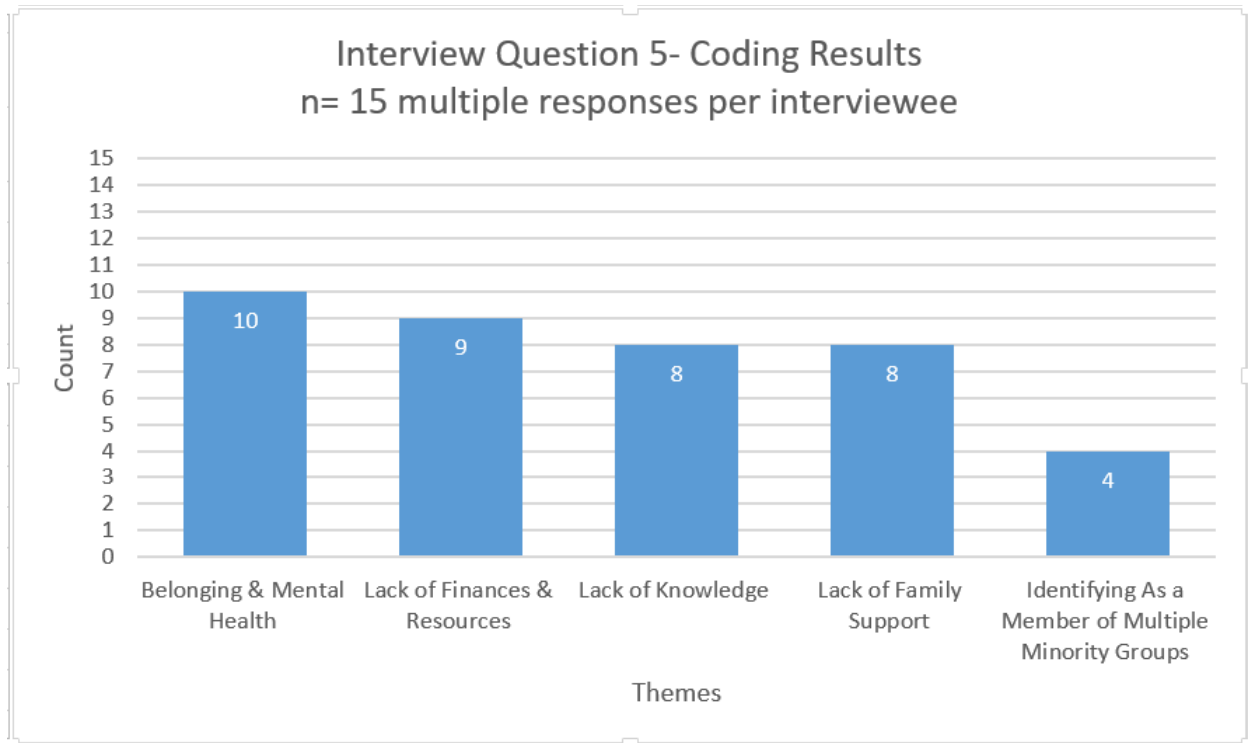


Figure 5. IQ5: What challenges do first generation students face that hinder their success?

***Belonging & mental health.*** The first theme that was elucidated in interview question 5 was belonging and mental health. Codes under this theme encompassed feeling a lack of belonging, isolation, fear of not fitting in, imposter syndrome, and difficulty making connections. Of the participants, 10 (66%) lauded the impact that belonging and mental health had on first generation student success. P10 intimated, “Of course, I would say imposter syndrome, it consistently shows up whether it’s in academics, you know, thinking about internships or even like thinking about launching into like their career path. So I feel like that kind of like stems throughout your whole experience, but I think that doubt, that fear consistently stems and it’s kind of hard to even bottle.”

***Lack of finances & resources.*** The second theme that appeared in the research was a lack of finances and resources. Elements of this theme included, financial obstacles, lack of resources, economic issues, purchasing resources, and faculty not making resources accessible. Nine (60%)



of the participants mentioned that this theme was a significant challenge that hindered first generation student success. P4 offered, “So just the lack of resources that they come in with is a significant point to address. How are they going to live on campus? How are they going to live? And you know, how do you get roommates and how do you strategize to bring their rent down?”

***Lack of knowledge.*** Lack of knowledge was cited as the third theme to emerge in interview question 5. This theme had components such as, no social capital, hidden curriculum, and lack of knowledge. Eight (53%) participants spoke about first generation student’s lack of knowledge as being an obstacle in their student success. P2 explained, “You know, just not having that social capital of having had family members attend college before. They, in a way, start a step behind and so that’s why I think that giving resources and programming that institutions have, the more the better and to help fill that gap.”

***Lack of family support.*** A fourth theme was lack of family support which encompassed mentions of family tensions, family influence, family issues, and distance from family and friends. Eight (53%) of the participants said that a lack of family support had a large impact on first generation student success. P13 spoke, “What has come across my radar from time to time is that students will have family issues, family drama, or family issues at home.” P15 further offered, “Maybe you’re going out of your city, maybe you’re going out of state and so you’re leaving that network, you’re leaving your safety net, potentially your family or your friends or the people that you go to for advice and so that creates this disconnect of I’m in this new situation.”

***Identifying as a member of multiple minority groups.*** The final theme that emerged in interview question 5 was identifying as a member of multiple minority groups. This theme included, cultural expectations and being a part of another minority group in addition to being a

first generation student. Of the participants, four (26%) mentioned this theme as a challenge for first generation students that hindered their success. P4 said, “We have first generation students who are Latina and female and when you really dig deep in terms of what that means, then you have to consider the cultural roles that they play within the household. There’s maybe a different set of expectations for those students that are more culturally related in terms of helping out with the household, siblings, finances, translation.”

**Research question 2 summary.** Research question 2 was focused on answering what challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success? Participants noted that competing schedules, feelings of not belonging, emotional responses, finances, and a refusal to ask for help were all factors that higher education institutions experienced when attempting to increase first generation student success. Furthermore, belonging and mental health, finances, a lack of knowledge and family support, as well as identifying as a member of multiple minority groups were all challenges that hindered first generation student success.

### **Research Question 3**

Research question 3 asked participants, How do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success? The research question employed three interview questions:

1. How would you define first generation student success?
2. How do you measure first generation student success? What does that look like?
3. How do you track success? When do you evolve?

**Interview question 6.** How would you define first generation student success? The six themes in this interview question included: graduation, retention, career readiness/placement,

resource utilization, acclimation to environment, and academic excellence (see Figure 6). There was an outlier within this interview question that sparked a fruitful and insightful discussion regarding a need to expand the definition of student success to be more holistic. This outlier will be discussed more fully in chapter 5.

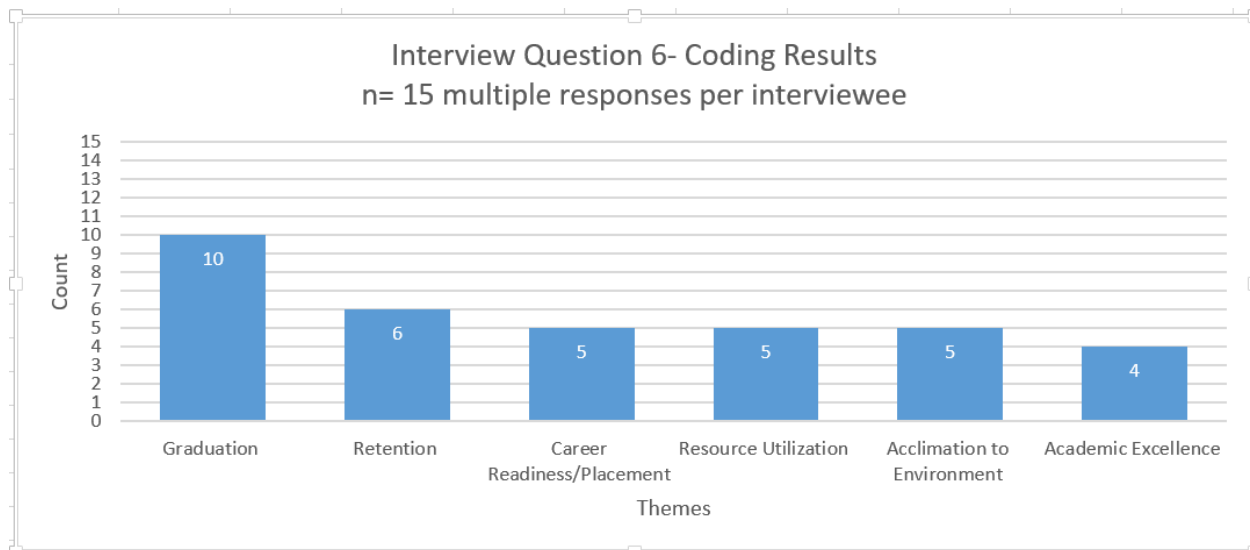


Figure 6. IQ 6: How would you define first generation student success?

**Graduation.** Graduation was the first and most prominent theme that emerged in interview question 6. The theme included, four-year graduation rates, graduating in a strong position, and degree completion. Of the participants, 10 (66%) spoke about this theme as a definition for first generation student success. P14 noted, “Our business is to graduate people in the strongest position possible.” P11 said, “I would say college graduation. I would think graduating from a four year institution.”

**Retention.** The theme of retention was the second theme to appear. The theme encompassed the importance of retention and persistence. Six (40%) of the participants mentioned retention as an important part of the definition of first generation student success. P3 offered, “I would define first generation student success in several ways. One is just retention rate that the student stays on campus for four years and then graduates on time.”

***Career readiness/placement.*** Career readiness and placement was the third theme that arose in interview question 6. The theme was comprised of career success, recognition of life after college, finding meaningful work, and success as an alumni. Five (33%) of the participants spoke of career readiness and placement for first generation students as a definition of student success. P4 explained, “It’s not just the fact that they completed a degree, but they actually are on their way with the career or an employment possibility and that is really the goal while they’re here.”

***Resource utilization.*** The utilization of resources was theme number 4 and included mentions of accepting help from resources designed for first gen students, skill building, student utilized resources to thrive on campus, and a confidence in skills. Five (33%) participants discussed resource utilization in the answers. P9 said, “So I’ve defined it as a student being provided with the support and resources to ensure that they thrive on their own terms.”

***Acclimation to environment.*** The fifth theme to appear was acclimation to environment. The theme utilized elements like student satisfaction, belonging on campus, community engagement, and enhancing community. Of the participants, five (33%) spoke of the necessity of a student’s acclimation to the campus environment. P6 explained, “We’re doing some new data analytics with some belonging surveys that we’ve created to try to measure some of those things.”

***Academic excellence.*** The final theme that was brought up was academic excellence which included labels such as, academic achievement, exceeding standards, success in rigor, and progressing in your major. Four (26%) of the participants discussed academic excellence as a definition of first generation student success. P13 expressed, “Whatever holistic success looks

like in terms of academics and in progressing with your major.” P2 further said, “I think at least meeting or exceeding standards.”

**Interview question 7.** Interview questions seven asked, how do you measure first generation student success? What does that look like? Five major themes emerged from the interview question that included: campus community engagement, survey/assessment data, academic performance, graduation, and retention (see Figure 7).

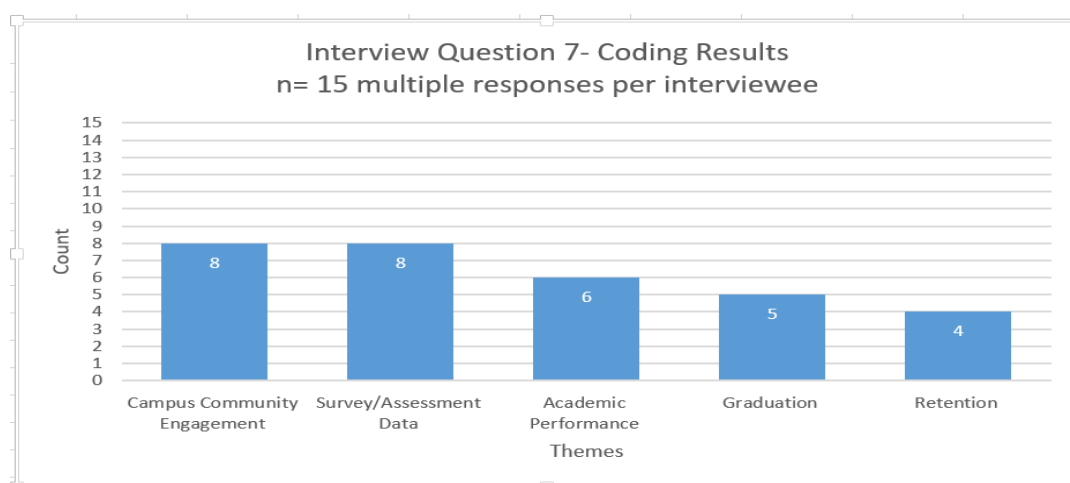


Figure 7. IQ 7: How do you measure first generation student success? What does that look like?

**Campus community engagement.** The first theme to appear in interview question 7 was campus community engagement. This theme had the components of a sense of community, student engagement, participation in extracurriculars, attendance at events, engagement on campus, engagement with alumni network, and using resources. Eight (53%) of the participants spoke of campus and community engagement as a way to measure first generation student success. P10 stated, “I think the easiest way to define it is maybe making sure students are not just surviving, but thriving both in and out of the classroom.” P14 elaborated, “We look at what kind of extracurricular and co-curricular experiences have they had and we expect and want them to do some of those things too.”

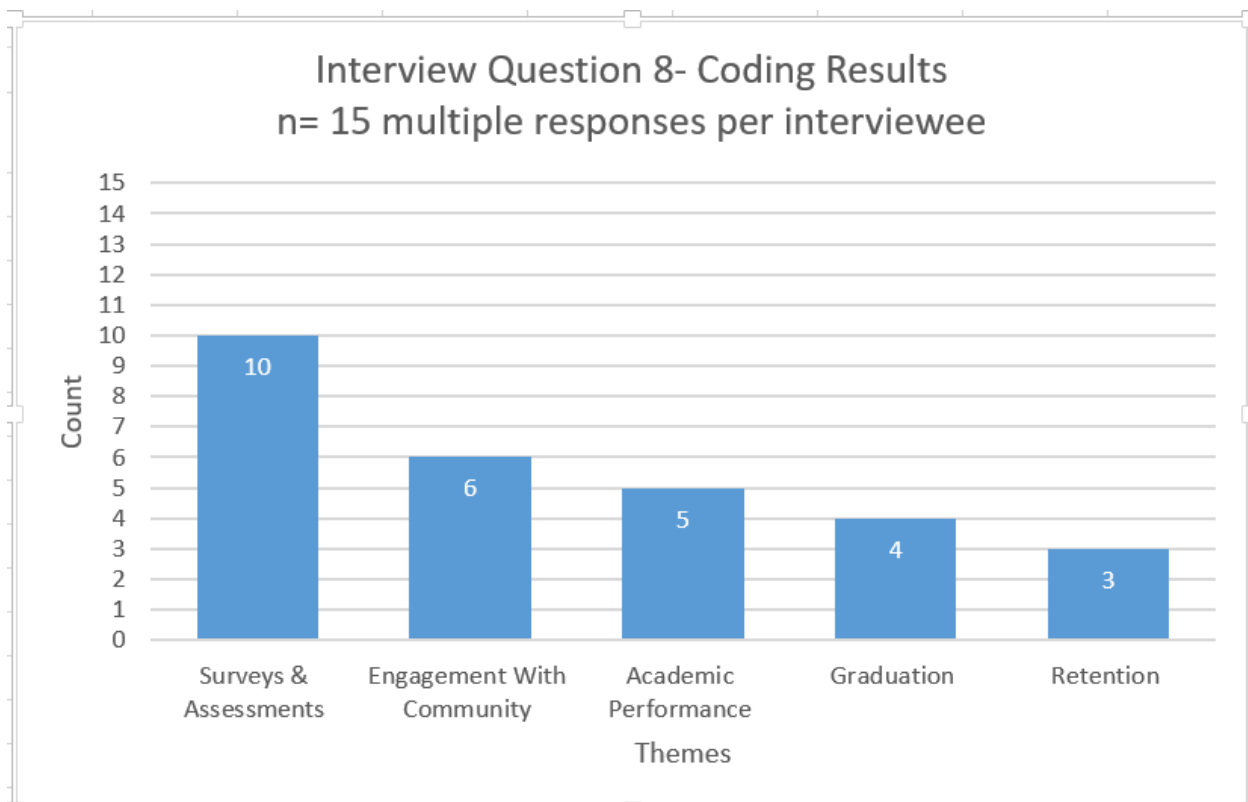
***Survey/assessment data.*** The second theme to appear was survey and assessment data which included the labels, percentage of accepted first generation applicants, exit surveys, belonging survey, satisfaction surveys, focus groups, and measuring scholarship amounts. Eight (53%) participants admitted using surveys and assessment data to measure first generation student success. P15 said, “So predominantly they’re survey based and then our mentees will submit an interaction log and it sounds so fancy, but it’s really just a form that’s digital and they log into it and submit like I did this workshop, I met with my peer mentor. There’s also a box at the end where they reflect.”

***Academic performance.*** The third theme in interview question 7 was academic performance which encompassed academic progress reports, GPA, and progressing in your major. Six (40%) of the participants mentioned academic performance as a reliable measurement for first generation student success. P6 explained, “We’re starting to look at kind of more earlier interventions and you know we have academic progress reports and who’s not doing well.”

***Graduation.*** As the fourth theme in interview question 7, graduation was noted as an important way to measure first generation student success through graduation and graduation rates. Five (33%) of the participants discussed graduation and degree completion. P2 said “I think high retention rates, high graduation rates, and high career placement. I think all those things.”

***Retention.*** The final theme in interview question 7 was retention which included elements like retention rate and persistence. Four (26%) of the participants noted the importance of retention rates in measuring first generation student success. P6 said, “We look at persistence rates for the fall and the spring.” P15 also noted, “I will tell you that a couple of our indicators include persistence from semester to semester, as well as fall to fall retention.”

**Interview question 8.** Interview question 8 asked participants, how do you track success? When do you evolve? The question yielded five main themes which included: surveys and assessments, engagement with community, academic performance, graduation, and retention (see Figure 8).



*Figure 8.* IQ 8: How do you track success? When do you evolve?

**Surveys & assessments.** The premier theme in interview question 8 was surveys and assessments which included labels like, tracking marketing efforts, student feedback, exit interviews, evaluations, pre and post surveys and comparing cohorts. Of the participants, 10 (66%) said that they utilized surveys and assessment tools to track first generation student success and evolve their initiatives. P12 offered, “We run assessments every year and the Board of directors meets all summer to find better ways to implement ideas to continue student

success.” P14 further elaborated by saying, “I brought the idea of building into this work a culture of assessment. So everything we do, we’re trying to measure what we’re doing and whether it’s effective.”

***Engagement with community.*** The second theme to emerge was engagement with community which showed elements like comfortability using resources, involvement with the community, engagement on campus, and comfortability in the community. Six (40%) of the participants discussed first generation student engagement with the community as a means to track success and evolve. P5 said, “I think I just go back to when they feel comfortable using resources and I don’t have to prompt them to do so, they’re just like oh yeah I’ve been doing this, this, and the other. Being involved in the community and feeling good about it.”

***Academic performance.*** The third theme in interview question 8 was academic performance. This theme included labels such as, data on D’s, F’s, and withdrawals from classes, GPA, grade reports, and progress reports. Five (33%) participants discussed using academic performance as a way to track success and evolve their methods. P8 offered, “We keep track of average number of hours completed, GPA, and all of that stuff that we can pull in a report. So every semester we’re running those kinds of reports of hours attempted, hours completed, the term GPA, the cumulative GPA, and we can run those same reports on graduation.”

***Graduation.*** The theme of graduation appeared fourth in the research with graduation rates being a key element. Four (26%) of the participants mentioned graduation as an indicator of tracking success and using the rates of graduation to know when they should evolve. P6 noted, “We’re using persistence and graduation for the two main measures of success. We are looking at kind of what’s the baseline data and trying to improve those rates.”



***Retention.*** Retention was the fifth and final theme in interview question 8. The theme included retention rates, as well as comparisons of retention rates from year to year. Of the participants, three (20%) cited retention as a tracker of first generation student success and a weathervane of when to evolve. P4 stated, “Well, there’s the hard metrics of continuation rates and graduation rates which give us some information.” P9 elaborated with, “So there are graduation rates, retention rates, all those things that we look at for class, the year by year with classes, and it’s actually very interesting to see how much on a macro level it’s impacting students.”

**Research question 3 summary.** Research question 3 examined the questions of how do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success. Participants defined first generation student success in terms of graduation, retention, career readiness and placement, as well as utilizing resources, acclimating to the campus environment, and achieving academic excellence. In terms of measuring and tracking first generation student success, participants utilized tools such as surveys, assessments, engagement with the community, academic performance, graduation, and retention.

#### **Research Question 4**

Research question 4 asked the participants: What recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students? Under research question 4 there were two interview questions that aided in answering the larger question:

1. Are there strategies you’ve employed to support first generation students that you would not reuse?

2. Do you have any advice for faculty who are engaged in facilitating success for first generation students?

**Interview question 9.** Are there strategies you employed to support first generation students that you would not reuse? Interview question 9 yielded three distinct themes: not utilizing a holistic, individualized approach, limiting size of engagement strategies, and avoiding collaboration with other offices and departments (see Figure 9).

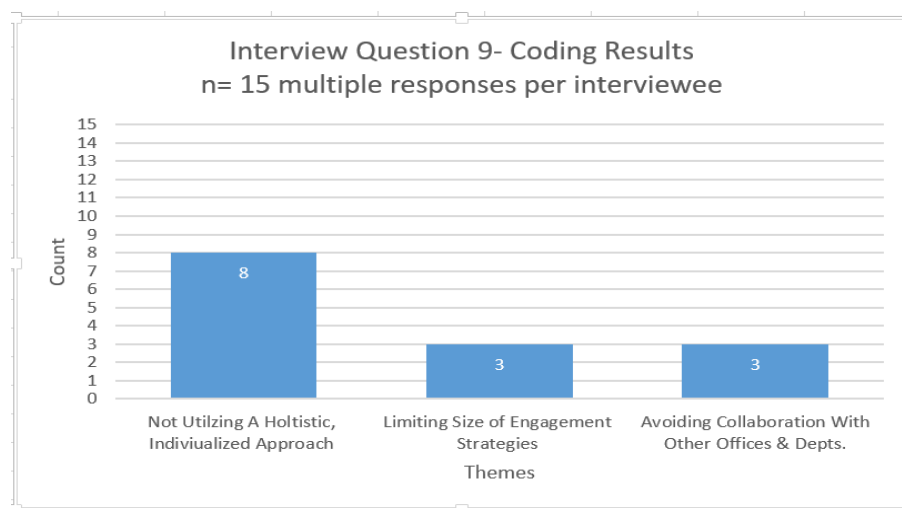


Figure 9. IQ 9: Are there strategies you've employed to support first generation students that you would not reuse?

***Not utilizing a holistic, individualized approach.*** The first theme that emerged was not utilizing a holistic, individualized approach to first generation student success. This theme included elements like, not listening to student's needs, making too many assumptions, treating first generation students as a blanket population, blanket initiatives failing, having too academically focused programs. Eight (53%) of the participants discussed elements within this theme as reasons why programs or initiatives were not as successful as they could be. P12 explained, "Ours is an evolving program with the times, there are things that worked 10-15 years

ago that just do not work in today's world. I work hard to try to communicate with students and solicit advice from them as to what works best, and what does not work. This is all based around the idea that this program is truly in tune with the students we serve and actually listen to their ideas as well.”

***Limiting size of engagement strategies.*** The second theme to appear was limiting the size of engagement strategies which included mentions of only working with small cohorts and needing to expand the reach of programs. Three (20%) of the participants noted that having limits on size for programming has caused challenges at their institutions. P11 noted, “For us it was our summer bridge program. It was just so small. We were only able to really work with 12 to 15 students and ideally we could invite the whole enrolled first generation class to come to campus early and get a pre-new student orientation experience.”

***Avoiding collaboration with other offices and departments.*** The final theme to arise was avoiding collaboration with other offices and departments which included mentions of needing to cultivate a more unified university support system and not collaborating with other offices and departments to the fullest. Of the participants, three (20%) expressed that not having collaboration amongst offices and departments on campus was not a useful strategy. P9 offered, “I would say anything that we’ve done that only involved our business is not good enough, not sustainable, ultimately not serving the students as best they could. Things that tend to bring in other folks and allow us to collaborate with other people across campus has been really very, very useful for us.”

**Interview question 10.** Interview question 10 asked participants, do you have any advice for faculty who are engaged in facilitating success for first generation students? The questions elucidated three themes: make an effort to engage with students as partners/supporters, avoid

assumptions/educate yourself on the population, and identify if you are first gen or a first gen ally (see Figure 10).

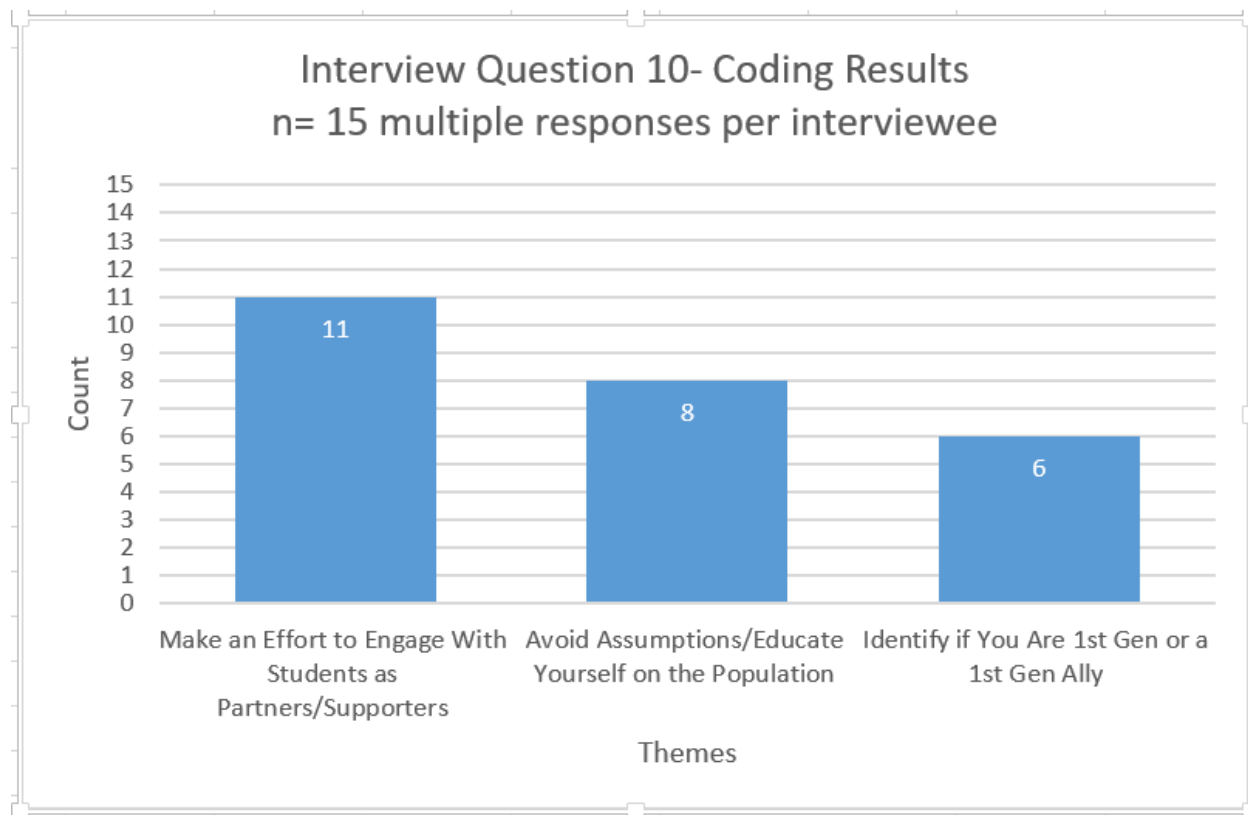


Figure 10. IQ 10: Do you have any advice for faculty who are engaged in facilitating success for first generation students?

***Make an effort to engage with students as partners/supporters.*** The first theme that appeared in interview question 10 was make an effort to engage with students as partners and supporters. Elements under this theme included, invite students to participate, show them you care, make yourself accessible, engage outside of the classroom, affirm and honor differences, and be a partner, not a power figure. Of the participants, 11 (73%) discussed this theme in terms of offering advice to faculty concerning facilitation of first generation student success. P12 noted, “Once a true organic relationship has been formed they will trust you and rely on you. It’s

the greatest feeling to help students with limited resources, it's a better feeling when they walk across the graduation stage." P15 further elaborated, "We encourage our faculty to set the tone of I'm here to work with you, I'm here to support you, I'm here to give you as much knowledge and tools as you want to utilize, but it's up to you to take advantage of it so that students can really hit that first day, that first semester with confidence that this is a partnership."

***Avoid assumptions/educate yourself on the population.*** The second theme that arose was avoid assumptions and educate yourself on the population. Labels such as, be aware of the population, familiarize yourself with first generation resources so you can help. Understand what first gen will mean in your classroom, raise knowledge and awareness of population, and learn and stay engaged with the literature. Eight (53%) participants noted this theme in their responses. P14 offered, "I would encourage anybody whether they're a faculty member or a staff person to stay engaged with the literature on this population. Consume as much as you can about what people are doing by way of publishing books, or research projects, or whatever the case may be around this topic. I just think raising our overall awareness and knowledge about who these students are, what backgrounds they're coming from, what challenges they face."

***Identify if you are 1st gen or a 1st gen ally.*** The third and final theme to emerge from interview question 10 was identifying if you are a first generation student or if you are a first generation student ally as a faculty member. This theme included, sharing your story and identifying if you are first generation or a first generation ally. Six (40%) of the participants spoke about the importance of, as a faculty member, letting your students know if you are yourself, a first generation student or at least if you are supportive and an ally of first generation students. P1 said, "The biggest thing we talk about are sharing their story, especially if they ever, you know, stumbled at any point because I think it's very much a you're supposed to be perfect,

you're not supposed to mess up culture now and for students to understand that it's okay to have those little stumbles along the way." P6 elaborated by saying, "First of all, just letting faculty let students know that they're first gen and what that means and what their experience is because one thing that we know is if a faculty feels relatable, students are more likely to engage in that course and with that faculty, kind of humanizing them to that experience."

**Summary of research question 4.** Research question 4 wanted to determine, what recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students? Participants noted that they need to utilize a more holistic, individual approach when engaging with students, as well as expanding the reach of their programs to accommodate more first generation students and collaborating more with their campus partners in other offices and departments. Participants also advised faculty to make more of an effort to engage with first generation students as partners and supporters rather than power figures while also avoiding assumptions, educating themselves more about the population, and identifying themselves as either first generation students or first generation student allies.

## **Chapter 4 Summary**

This study sought to elucidate the best practices in achieving first generation student success in higher education. To achieve this goal, 15 participants were gathered and asked 10 semi-structured interview questions that fell under four larger research questions.

RQ1: What strategies are used by higher education institutions to increase first generation student success?

RQ2: What challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success?

RQ3: How do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success?

RQ4: What recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students?

After the 15 participants were interviewed, the interviews were transcribed, coded, and peer-reviewed by two Pepperdine University doctoral students. Over the course of the interview 48 themes were discovered that helped to shine more light on the larger research questions. The following chapter will delve deeper into a discussion of the themes, potential implications of the study, recommendations for possible further and future research, and overall conclusions to the study.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

With first generation students becoming an increasingly prevalent population on higher education institution campuses, it is beneficial to determine ways in which to effectively and efficiently serve these students. This research study anticipated examining the ways in which higher education institutions across the country worked with first generation student populations and the programs and initiatives that they have designed to aid students. The overarching goal of the study was aimed at identifying institutional best practices for generating and encouraging first generation student success within the landscape of higher education. The research gathered in this study can be implemented within colleges and universities that are attempting to increase their first generation student success, as well as institutions that may be in the midst of actively trying to recruit more first generation students and want to broaden their knowledge on how to help students engage in a successful transition to college. This chapter offers a summary of the research study, as well as a reiteration of the purpose behind the study. Furthermore, this chapter will engage in a discussion of the results found during the study, the researcher's recommendations regarding further research, and final conclusions drawn from the study.

### **Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study was to elucidate best practices in achieving first generation student success in higher education. Inspired by research gathered and presented in the literature review, the study employed four overarching research questions which encompassed a total of 10 open-ended interview questions to illuminate the results of the study. The participants selected for this study were identified by searching the internet for the most first generation student friendly higher education institutions, which are defined for the purpose of this study as institutions with the highest number of first generation



students matriculating, as well as the highest first generation student graduation rates. Once the institutions were identified, the researcher examined the institution websites for programs and initiatives directed at first generation student success and who was leading them. A total of 15 participants were chosen for interviews. Participants were required to be higher education faculty or staff with at least two years of experience working with programs, courses, or initiatives directed at first generation student success. The participants also needed to be available for a face-to-face, phone, or virtual interview to be scheduled at their convenience. In order to achieve maximum variation, participants were selected from across the United States, at various institutions, and at various levels of experience in higher education.

The collection of data for this study was completed via 15 participant interviews that consisted of 10 open-ended interview questions designed to expound on the best practices of achieving first generation student success. The interview questions were validated by participating in peer-review with two Pepperdine University doctoral students familiar with qualitative, phenomenological study procedures. The interview questions were further reviewed by a panel of experts to ensure validity. All participants were provided with an informed consent form and a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview. All participant interviews were, with their permission, recorded and later transcribed by the researcher into a Microsoft Word document. All transcriptions were reviewed, analyzed, and then coded for common themes which were then peer-reviewed by two Pepperdine University doctoral students to ensure validity. Reviewer recommendations were considered and implemented into the final themes. After coding had concluded, the researcher gathered the themes for each interview question into bar graphs to serve as a visual summary of the data collected and results. Each graph represented

an interview question with each column on the graph representing a theme within the interview question.

## **Discussion of Findings**

This research study sought to decode the best practices for achieving first generation student success in higher education. In order to accomplish this goal, four research questions were employed:

RQ1: What strategies are used by higher education institutions to increase first generation student success?

RQ2: What challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success?

RQ3: How do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success?

RQ4: What recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students?

A variety of themes and connections were drawn between the research questions and the results for each research question will be reviewed in-depth in the following section.

Comparisons and contrasts will also be made in regard to the research collected in the literature review and the participant interview results.

**Results for RQ1.** The first research question sought to understand what strategies are used by higher education institutions to increase first generation student success. A total of 16 themes emerged over the course of three interview questions. The first interview question found that higher education institutions could best support first generation students by providing first generation specific resources, having a holistic understanding of first generation student needs,

sharing knowledge and offering clear communication, providing mentorship, and identifying and tracking trends. The second interview question discovered that participant institutions most commonly offered skill building services, mentor programs, cohort based curriculums, scholarships, summer bridge programs, and peer clubs and groups as programs, services, and resources provided for first generation student success. Finally, the third interview question under research question one found that the participant institutions used peer and community engagement, enhancing student comfortability and accessibility, social and financial incentives, varied outreach methods, and mandatory participation to encourage first generation students to participate.

**Discussion of RQ1.** The data collected for research question one revealed that increasing first generation student success is a multifaceted and complex approach. The participants intimated that providing first generation student specific resources to increase knowledge, skills, and support is paramount, as is having a holistic understanding of the population's needs. Constructing first generation student's knowledge and understanding of the campus environment and expectations, as well as their social capital or, as Daly & Silver (2008) define the term, a type of coin or currency, where interactions and relationships function as resources that are able to be transformed into other forms of capital, can help to enhance student success exponentially.

Being clear and deliberate with communication to first generation students is also of importance as when expectations, instructions, and information are muddled, difficulties can arise. Communicating about where and who to ask for help, as well as who to contact about certain issues can be an obstacle for first generation students and their student success (Hagedorn et al., 2007). When faced with questions and problems, first generation students should have access to the information they need to easily be able to discern where to go and who to ask for

help. However, this may not always be the situation and can ultimately result in first generation student's frustration and disillusionment. These feelings can cause a lack of follow through on the student's part which can impact student success (Hagedorn et al., 2007).

Mentorship proved to be an integral part of increasing first generation student success for the participants interviewed. Offering both peer and faculty/staff mentorship opportunities appeared as a common theme among the institutions examined in this study. Mentorship has proven to help students not only perform better academically, but socially as well while also encouraging student retention to graduation (Collier, 2017). It is becoming a trend for institutions to integrate peer mentoring into various programs on their campuses which encourages students who may be struggling and need support to receive help along their academic journeys (Moore et al., 2017).

Offering summer bridge programs and encouraging a cohort based curriculum were also common strategies for increasing first generation student success among the participants. Gathering first generation students prior to classes beginning and providing them with an opportunity to meet and work with other first generation students while learning how to transition to college has been a beneficial approach for the participants. Summer bridge programs can be a useful strategy for students to be introduced to their new environment before classes begin and meet other students who they identify with. Programs can vary in their structure and content, but they typically are conducted in the summer between high school and college. They can last a week to several weeks depending upon the higher education institution and the breadth and depth of the program (Henson, 2018). Bridge programs can also provide students with opportunities to make contacts with faculty, staff, and peers or cohort members. The relationships built in these programs have the potential to evolve into mentorship opportunities

that could continue through to graduation (Henson, 2018). Moreover, students who take part in learning communities and cohort based learning modules, like summer bridge programs, find a stronger bond with their classmates while also engaging more fully at both the academic and social levels (CCCSE, 2012).

Making education affordable was another important aspect of increasing student success among the interviewees. Offering scholarships, grants, necessity funds, and other forms of financial support were named as important ways to support first generation students. Many four-year institutions are attempting to aid students who are facing financial difficulty due to exponentially rising attendance costs. For example, Georgia State University awards grants to first generation students who would otherwise be unable to continue their studies for lack of funding (Moore, Schragar, & Bracco, 2017). Lower cost options, grants, and waivers make higher education more accessible for first generation students who may need assistance financially.

Encouraging first generation students to engage with the campus community was also noted by the majority of the participants as a way to increase student success and participation. First generation students who are actively involved in their campus communities are much more likely to be engaged with their college experience and persist until graduation (Noel-Levitz, 2010). Moreover, research has shown a direct correlation between first generation students pushing themselves to interact and their acceptance and engagement within the campus culture (Astin, 1993; Braxton et al., 2004).

**Results for RQ2.** Research question 2 sought to examine what challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success? Participants explained the complex issues behind the challenges that first generation

students face, not only in utilizing the resources designed for them, but also in their overall success in a higher education setting. The participants noted that competing schedules, feeling a sense of not belonging, lack of knowledge, lack of finances and resources, as well as a lack of family support and identifying as being a member of multiple minority groups can all contribute to the plights and struggles that first generation students face on campus.

**Discussion of RQ2.** Participants noted the importance of ensuring that first generation students feel a sense of belonging and have a healthy mental state while on campus. Student feelings of isolation and not belonging were common mentions within the interview process when asked about challenges facing first generation student success. Possessing and cultivating a campus climate that encourages first-generation student belonging and acclimation cannot be understated. Higher education campuses must construct a welcoming, supportive, and interactive environment that first generation students can find a sense of community with, not a landscape that causes students to feel alienated and isolated (Lovano McCann, 2017). Beyond encouraging a sense of community and support, institutions should promote fostering a strong sense of competency in first generation students. This helps students reconcile that while they may be in an environment with their multi-generational peers who have higher levels of experience, they are equally capable of success (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012; Mitchall, 2015).

Participants frequently mentioned first generation student's lack of knowledge, resources, and finances that proved to be a significant challenge in obtaining student success. While many institutions are attempting to provide scholarships, grants, and additional funding to ease first generation student's obstacles, there are still issues of a gap in resources and knowledge that they are unprepared for when they arrive on campus. Having gaps in preparation and readiness for

higher education can leave first generation students lacking in the skills, resources, and knowledge that will aid them in their student success. In an attempt to bridge this gap many high schools, colleges, and universities are partnering with one another to cultivate a culture of college readiness and success (Community College Research Center, 2013). Specifically, by employing college readiness assessments and building a multifaceted curriculum focused on bolstering knowledge and resources can help to encourage a successful college transition (Community College Research Center, 2013). Increasing first generation student knowledge, resources, and access to resources can help to ease the deficit that students can experience in higher education.

Having a lack of family support can also provide significant challenges in first generation student success. A lack of support can vary from a lack of family knowledge surrounding higher education to outright family tension experienced by a student attending college. The inability to have questions about higher education answered easily and effectively by a trusted family member can be difficult for students who are seeking information that is foreign to them. Research has shown that students whose parents did not attend college are not as prepared for the transition and have difficulty acclimating more so than their multi-generational peers (Pascarella et al., 1996). First generation students often must also juggle family expectations, as well as other academic and work commitments which lead to competing schedules that challenge first generation student success. Institutions historically have been critical of students being distracted by family and work commitments that keep them from being as present on campus. Many institutions equate participation on campus with a student's belonging in the community (Daly & Silver, 2008). However, institutions should be commending first generation students for their ability to multi-task instead of chastising them for their diminished presence on campus (Whitley

et al., 2018). While building community is an important part of first generation student success, having support from that campus community which understands first generation student's unique challenges is equally important.

**Results for RQ3.** Research question 3 examined how do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success? Participants explained that graduation and retention rates, career readiness, resource utilization, and academic excellence were all tied to their definition of first generation student success. Furthermore, surveys, assessments, academic performance, engagement with the campus community, graduation rates, and retention rates were all utilized as measurements and trackers of first generation student success.

**Discussion of RQ3.** By engaging with the campus community students begin to identify as being part of the larger student culture. This student identity centrality fosters student retention through involvement with the college and a commitment to higher education (Bowman & Felix, 2017). First generation students who identify with the student campus culture desire to be successful in the environment. Students who foster higher levels of student identity centrality are also more resilient in overcoming obstacles that would likely be a deterrent for others with lower levels of student centrality. Students who possess lower levels of student centrality are not as likely to be retained on campus and graduate (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Bowman & Felix; Hurtado, Cuellar, & Guillermo-Wann, 2011). The participant discussion of the importance of both retention and graduation was of interest in the study. While student retention can be an indicator of student success since keeping students enrolled in college is a key part of success, it can also prove detrimental (Strayhorn, 2015). Institutions can sometimes make retention a higher priority than student degree completion and graduation and therefore focus on maintaining



students on campus rather than looking toward their future graduation (Strayhorn, 2015). The majority of participants spoke of graduation and retention as one in the same and suggested that one element could not exist without the other.

Academic performance was a common measurement of first generation student success mentioned by the participants. Participants noted that GPA, academic progress reports, and progress toward degree completion all served to indicate whether a student was achieving student success in college. A first generation student's commitment to their academic advancement in and out of the classroom is incredibly important to student success (Andreas, 2018; Nwaokoro, 2010). Being prepared for the academic rigor found in higher education can help to aid first generation students in their academic success. First generation students who began engaging in academically rigorous courses in high school, as well as students who participated in Advanced Placement courses and took the associated tests for the courses to receive college credit, possessed a higher opportunity for student success at the college level (College Board, 2010). Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for many first generation students to experience gaps in their academic readiness for college which results in the need for more remedial coursework upon entry to higher education. Participating in remedial coursework places first generation students at a higher risk of academic failure. 36% of first generation students noted that they were enrolled in remedial coursework upon enrolling at a college or university ("First-Generation Students – PNPI," 2018). While remedial courses may be necessary they can impede students from progressing at the expected rate for a four-year graduation timeline. Participants expressed their desire to not only be aware of students' academic progress, but to offer support and early intervention should the students need it to ensure that they are achieving success and making progress toward degree completion.

In addition to keeping track of first generation student academic performance, participants also measure student's participation and engagement with the campus community. By using surveys and assessments participants explained that they can track not only student attendance at events and programming, but also where they can expand their resources and instruction to include what the students really need and want. Engagement with the community offers opportunities for first generation students to make connections with their peers, faculty, and staff that enhance their student success. First generation students may find it particularly challenging or intimidating to engage with faculty and staff because of their lack of comfortability in how to engage in a conversation with them. Student comfortability with faculty and staff, both inside and outside of the classroom is significant to student success (Hutchinson, 2017). Students feeling comfortable and engaging with those around them is paramount to students achieving student success. Students who engage and become part of the community within the campus, as well as identifying with the interests and values of the institution are more likely to be successful in their higher education goals (Kim et al., 2010).

While the results found in this research question utilized more concrete measurements to define, measure, and track success, the researcher was surprised that more holistic measurements were not employed. During an interview with P7, the participant called for a less rigid definition of what constitutes student success. While nearly every participant interviewed mentioned graduation and retention rates, as well as academic performance as definitions of success, little mention was made of students who take time off, but eventually return to complete their degrees, or students who do not fit the traditional four-year graduation rate, but receive their degrees outside of that time frame. Student paths to success are as varied as the students themselves and while they may not always follow the narrow trajectory that has been made a commonality

amongst higher education institutions, it does not mean that they are not successful. Higher education institutions have created a very uniform and unforgiving definition of student success that can be exclusive and unforgiving of students who reside outside of the mold.

**Results for RQ4.** Research question 4 asked, what recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students? Participants offered advice for institutions as a whole by encouraging a more holistic, individualized approach to engaging and supporting first generation students, as well as partnering and collaborating with other offices and departments on campus to create a more cohesive, unified support system and thus, reach a larger number of students. In regard to advice for faculty engaged in facilitating first generation student success, participants suggested making an effort to engage with students as partners and supporters, educating oneself on the population and avoid assumptions relating to the population, and finally, identifying as first generation or as an ally of first generation students.

**Discussion of RQ4.** Participants noted that utilizing a blanket approach to the first generation student population is an unsuccessful practice. Instead educating faculty and staff on the population and avoiding assumptions while cultivating a holistic and individualized approach to each student is a more beneficial strategy. In short, an institution's faculty and staff need to understand that the status quo is no longer acceptable and push for change and growth (The Aspen Institute, 2013). It is also necessary for higher education institutions to encourage collaboration across departments and campus offices with the idea of cultivating an environment with a united vision for the institution, as well as goals to achieve student success (Kezar, 2003). Constructing an institution with faculty and staff that are enthusiastic and passionate about the work they do and fostering partnerships through cross-divisional work, as well as continuing

staff development ensures an inclusive space promoting student learning and success (Kezar, 2003).

Faculty must also understand the integral part they play in first generation student success both in and out of the classroom. Encouraging positive interaction between faculty and students is imperative to increasing first generation students' comfortability on campus and expressing to them that they matter (CCCSE, 2010; K. P. Gonzalez, 2009; Hagedorn et al., 2002; Moore et al., 2017). Faculty should make the effort to learn their students' names and a bit about each of them in order to make them feel welcome and understood (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009). Faculty who offer their time and resources, both tangible and intangible, can greatly impact the development and success of first generation students (CCCSE, 2010; Hagedorn et al., 2002). First generation students need to know where they stand with professors, as well as how they are progressing in their coursework therefore, faculty who make time to discuss a student's progress and performance can be an integral part of helping students succeed (K. P. Gonzalez, 2009). Moreover, faculty should take opportunities to encourage students and celebrate their relevant achievements or goals which can cultivate a student's persistence through challenging coursework (Moore et al., 2017). Faculty with a student-centered focus can make a distinct difference in how students feel cared for and their willingness to reach out for help when they need it knowing they have an ally (CCCSE, 2010; Hagedorn et al., 2002).

### **Implications of the Study**

This study sought to examine the best practices in achieving first generation student success in higher education. The potential implications of this study are bifurcated. First, higher education institutions that already have an abundant first generation student population can utilize this study to further support and engage with those students by providing more first

generation student centric resources, offering mentorship opportunities, and creating a culture of cohesion and unity across office and departments to provide a network of support for students.

Secondly, higher education institutions that are lacking a first generation student population or who are seeing an increase in the population where it was absent on their campuses before could utilize this study to create a campus environment that is inclusive, welcoming, and supportive of first generation students. The best practices elucidated in this study could provide a foundational understanding of the challenges that first generation students face when attending a higher education institution and how those challenges can be alleviated by institutions that listen and provide for first generation student's wants and needs. Constructing a landscape where first generation students feel supported and can thrive is a noble undertaking for institutions desiring to become an academic destination for first generation students.

## **Study Conclusion**

This study sought to broaden the understanding of best practices in achieving first generation student success in higher education. Hailing from a rural area where higher education was not always a common avenue after high school and a lack of resources and knowledge left first generation students who did attend college at a disadvantage, the researcher was passionate to learn more about how to alleviate the challenges first generation students faced. To better understand the issue, 15 participants who consisted of higher education faculty and staff with at least two years of experience working with programs, courses, or initiatives designed to increase first generation student success, were interviewed. The interview consisted of ten open-ended interview questions which were recorded, transcribed, analyzed, coded, peer-reviewed for validity, and constructed into themes that helped to answer the study's results.

The participant interviews indicated that higher education institutions can best support and encourage first generation student success through several avenues. First, providing first generation student specific resources that meet the population's needs is incredibly important for student success. In addition to resources, institutions must possess a holistic and individualized understanding of the first generation student population by not making assumptions and educating themselves on the population in its entirety. Communicating clearly with first generation students and explaining the expectations and knowledge necessary to navigate campus is also crucial to student success. Knowledge sharing is key to flattening the learning curve that first generation students can experience when attempting to succeed in college. Providing peer, faculty, and staff mentorship opportunities can also be incredibly beneficial to increasing first generation success. Whether it be formal, informal, or both, mentorship can have a lasting and positive impact on students. Institutions should also be vigilant about identifying and tracking trends in first generation student attributes and behavior to ensure that they are continually meeting student's wants and needs. Implementing these strategies and recommendations can significantly increase first generation student success outcomes.

### **Application**

Applying the best practices found within the results of this study could take place in a plethora of ways. The researcher hopes to parlay the findings obtained in this study into a workshop designed to further higher education institution's understanding of the first generation student experience and how institutions can cultivate a supportive and inclusive environment for the population. The workshop would incorporate stakeholders from relevant offices, divisions, and departments across campus for a two-day training which would leave participants with a more detailed foundation of what factors constitute the first generation student population and

then continue on with how the institution can utilize its current resources to better serve the population, as well as what the institution can add to its retinue to further strengthen its resources.

Day one of the workshop would begin with identifying how first generation students are defined and what characteristics are most commonly associated with the population. The researcher would lead the participants in a conversation centered on perceptions and biases that are cultivated around the first generation student population and how these assumptions can be damaging to student's sense of self and ultimately to their student success on campus. The researcher would delve more deeply into the sub-groups of first generation students elucidating some of the more complex issues that these minority populations can experience on top of being a first generation student and the ways in which the participants could further educate themselves. Knowledge resources would be provided to participants with the intent of more fully engaging participant's understanding of the struggles that first generation students are experiencing. The workshop would continue by identifying the size of the participating institution's own first generation student population on campus. Representatives from the institution's admission office could provide the necessary data which would reflect how many students are applying to the institution, how many are admitted, how many enroll, and finally how many actually matriculate on campus. Having these numbers can aid in helping institutions understand what resources they may require to support students and how much support they can offer. From this information institutions can determine for example, how many students they may be able to invite for a summer bridge program or what cohort size they may be able to accommodate in a first generation student seminar. The researcher would help the participants understand the impact the first generation student population has on their campus and the ways

in which they can better serve the population and gather more personal data from it. The researcher would discuss the ways in which the institution could collect more pertinent data through utilizing survey and assessment methods to gather information from the current first generation student population on campus. Surveying current students allows institutions to see where there may be gaps in support or what resources students could use more of. Tapping into the current student population could significantly help institutions understand what their first generation student population needs.

The second day of the workshop would focus more deeply on what the participant institution is already doing to support its first generation student population while also examining the gaps or areas of growth that the institution could improve upon. The researcher would ask the representatives from the various offices, departments, and divisions what they are currently doing to cultivate a sense of inclusivity and understanding on campus for first generation students. Each stakeholder would examine their current state and then brainstorm ideas for improvement through a gap analysis to reach a desired future state. The researcher would have the participants begin to develop both short term and long term goals for themselves at a personal level, as well as at a departmental and campus level. Next, the researcher would outline strategies that have proven successful at institutions included within the study. This would allow the participants to see areas in which they are thriving while also drawing attention to gaps in student support. This could include strategies ranging from formal mentorship programs to cohort based curriculums. Bringing attention to varying methods of success could give participants a mental springboard from which they could instigate their own student success driven programs. Finally, the researcher would encourage the participants to brainstorm ways in which they could strengthen collaboration between their offices, departments and divisions. It is increasingly



important for institutions to make a concerted effort to have their various offices and departments collaborate on bringing support to first generation students while pooling resources to give students the highest quality of support. The researcher would suggest a monthly meeting with stakeholders from each office and department which could help to bring consensus and collaboration to events, programming, and resources designed for first generation students. This type of collaboration and resource sharing could prove beneficial in avoiding over programming students and while also providing quality support in a cohesive manner rather than an influx of unhelpful information and events that students are uninterested in. By listening to student needs and collaborating as a campus, institutions can provide beneficial and inclusive support that will aid in first generation student success. The researcher would help the participants take inventory of their programming and resources to find areas where collaboration would be most fruitful. The workshop would conclude by having the participants reiterate their personal goals, as well as their larger office and program goals, followed by putting together a schedule of collaborative programming for the semester ahead that will aim to serve the first generation student population with the highest levels of support and inclusivity.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study sought to better understand the best practices in achieving first generation student success in higher education, the research elucidated areas where further research could be conducted. Much of the literature on first generation student populations assumes that the population primarily exists within a lower socioeconomic status. While this conjunction of first generation, low-income student population is prevalent, there are also first generation students who reside in other minority groups and other socioeconomic classes. In addition, while this study focused on best practices for achieving first generation student success

in higher education in the United States, research concerning global practices could be of interest. Recommendations for future research include:

1. A study conducted that examines first generation student success for students who also identify as belonging to one or more minority groups.
2. A study conducted that examines first generation student success for students who are also first generation immigrants in the United States.
3. A study conducted that examines first generation student success for students who reside in middle and high socioeconomic classes.
4. A study conducted that examines first generation student success globally.

### **Final Thoughts**

The study outlined here was conducted with the goal of elucidating best practices in achieving first generation student success. The study carried a personal interest for the researcher who is from a rural location where higher education was not always encouraged and first generation students struggled to receive the support and resources they needed. With first generation students becoming a growing population across higher education campuses, it is imperative that institutions educate themselves on the population and employ a holistic, individualistic approach to students. Providing resources designed for first generation students, encouraging mentorship opportunities, building an inclusive and collaborative campus community, and fostering a system of support through faculty and staff can go a long way in providing first generation students with a solid foundation to pursue their academic journeys. By cultivating a campus climate that welcomes and encourages students while offering them the tools and resources to achieve their goals, institutions can create an environment primed for first generation student success.

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## APPENDIX A

### IRB Approval Notice



Pepperdine University  
24255 Pacific Coast Highway  
Malibu, CA 90263  
TEL: 310-506-4000

#### NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: February 24, 2020

Protocol Investigator Name: Hillary Long

Protocol #: 19-11-1220

Project Title: Best Practices for Achieving First Generation Student Success in Higher Education

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Hillary Long:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at [community.pepperdine.edu/irb](http://community.pepperdine.edu/irb).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chair

cc: Mrs. Katy Carr, Assistant Provost for Research

## APPENDIX B

### PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

#### INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

#### **Best Practices for Achieving First Generation Student Success in Higher Education**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Hillary Long and Dr. Farzin Madjidi, Ed.D at Pepperdine University, because you are a higher education faculty or staff member with at least 2 years of experience working with programs or initiatives directed at helping first generation students achieve success. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read the consent form. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form. You will also be given a copy of this form for your records.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study is to determine best practices for achieving first generation student success in higher education. The study will interview higher education faculty and staff who have had at least two years of experience working with programs and initiatives directed at first generation student success with the goal of understanding strategies that are beneficial and those that are not. The study will also attempt to identify challenges that first generation students face in achieving student success, as well as challenges that higher education institutions face in providing resources that will enhance student success.

#### **STUDY PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Review the set of interview questions which will be provided by the researcher.
2. Review and ask any questions regarding the Pepperdine University informed consent form.
3. Participate in a face to face or phone interview in which you will be asked a series of 10 qualitative questions pertaining to the study.

4. Agree to have the interview recorded for transcription purposes. If you do not agree to being recorded participation will not be accepted in this study.

### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

The potential and foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study include:

1. A potential breach of confidentiality
2. Possible negative reflection of self

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

While there are no direct benefits to the study participants, there are several anticipated benefits to society which include:

1. Increased understanding of challenges experienced by first generation students attempting to achieve student success.
2. Enhanced success strategies for higher education faculty and staff who are servicing first generation students.
3. Recommendations for higher education institutions that are seeking to attract more first generation students.
4. Recommendations for higher education institutions that are seeking to increase first generation student success.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

I will keep your records for this study confidential as far as permitted by law. However, if I am required to do so by law, I may be required to disclose information collected about you. Examples of the types of issues that would require me to break confidentiality are if you tell me about instances of child abuse and elder abuse. Pepperdine University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

The data will be stored on a password protected computer in the principal investigators place of residence. The data will be stored for a minimum of three years. The data collected will be transcribed from the interview and coded by the principal researcher and with the aid of three Pepperdine University doctoral students familiar with both qualitative research and the current study. Only the principal researcher, the student coders, and potentially, the dissertation committee will have access to the transcriptions. At the completion of the study the student coders and, if applicable, the dissertation committee will be asked to delete all materials related to this study from their devices. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Responses will be coded with a pseudonym and transcript data will be maintained separately. The audio-tapes will be destroyed once they have been transcribed.

## **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

## **ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION**

The alternative to participation in the study is not participating or completing only the items which you feel comfortable with.

## **EMERGENCY CARE AND COMPENSATION FOR INJURY**

If you are injured as a direct result of research procedures you will receive medical treatment; however, you or your insurance will be responsible for the cost. Pepperdine University does not provide any monetary compensation for injury.

## **INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION**

I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact Hillary Long at [hillary.long@pepperdine.edu](mailto:hillary.long@pepperdine.edu) or Dr. Farzin Madjidi at [farzin.madjidi@pepperdine.edu](mailto:farzin.madjidi@pepperdine.edu) if I have any other questions or concerns about this research.

## **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or research in general please contact Dr. Judy Ho, Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University 6100 Center Drive Suite 500, Los Angeles, CA 90045, 310-568-5753 or [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu).

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**UPDATED: Informed Consent Form (2/10/2020)**

**IRB Number:** 19-11-1220

**Study Title:** Best Practices for Achieving First Generation Student Success in Higher Education.

## **Invitation**

Dear [name],

My name is Hillary Long. I am conducting a study on the best practices for achieving first generation student success in higher education. If you are 19 years of age or older and are a higher education faculty or staff member with at least 2 years of experience working with programs or initiatives directed at helping first generation students achieve success, you may participate in this research. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read the consent form. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form. You will also be given a copy of this form for your records.

### **What is the reason for doing this research study?**

This is a research project that focuses on best practices for achieving first generation student success in higher education. In order to participate you must be 19 years of age or older and have at least 2 years of experience working with programs or initiatives directed at helping first generation students achieve success with the goal of understanding strategies that are beneficial and those that are not. The study will also attempt to identify challenges that first generation students face in achieving student success, as well as challenges that higher education institutions face in providing resources that will enhance student success.

### **What will be done during this research study?**

Participation in this study will require approximately 60 minutes of your time. You will be asked to:

1. Review the set of interview questions which will be provided by the researcher.
2. Review and ask any questions regarding the Pepperdine University informed consent form, as well as sign and return the form.
3. Participate in a face to face, phone, or video interview in which you will be asked a series of 10 qualitative questions pertaining to the study.
4. Agree to have the interview recorded for transcription purposes. If you do not agree to being recorded participation will not be accepted in this study.

Participation will take place at a time and location that are amenable to you. If a face to face interview is not possible, a phone or video interview can be substituted at a time that is convenient for you.

**What are the possible risks of being in this research study?**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

**What are the possible benefits to you?**

While there are no direct benefits to the study participants, there are several anticipated benefits to society.

The results of this study will be used to:

1. Increase understanding of challenges experienced by first generation students attempting to achieve student success.
2. Enhance success strategies for higher education faculty and staff who are servicing first generation students.
3. Offer recommendations for higher education institutions that are seeking to attract more first generation students.
4. Offer recommendations for higher education institutions that are seeking to increase first generation student success.

#### **How will information about you be protected?**

Your responses to this survey will be kept confidential. Your records for this study will be kept confidential as far as permitted by law. However, if required to do so by law, the principal investigator may be required to disclose information collected about you. Examples of the types of issues that would require the investigator to break confidentiality are if you discuss instances of child abuse and elder abuse. Pepperdine University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

The data will be stored on a password protected computer in the principal investigators place of residence. The data will be stored for a minimum of three years. The data collected will be transcribed from the interview and coded by the principal researcher and with the aid of three Pepperdine University doctoral students familiar with both qualitative research and the current study. Only the principal investigator, the student coders, and potentially, the dissertation

committee will have access to the transcriptions. At the completion of the study the student coders and, if applicable, the dissertation committee will be asked to delete all materials related to this study from their devices. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Responses will be coded with a pseudonym and transcript data will be maintained separately. The audio-tapes will be destroyed once they have been transcribed.

### **What are your rights as a research subject?**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s):

Hillary Long at [hillary.long@pepperdine.edu](mailto:hillary.long@pepperdine.edu)

Dr. Farzin Madjidi at [farzin.madjidi@pepperdine.edu](mailto:farzin.madjidi@pepperdine.edu)

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

- Phone: 1(310)568-2305

- Email: [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu)

### **What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?**

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not



to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

### **Documentation of Informed Consent**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By clicking on the I Agree button below, your consent to participate is implied. You should print a copy of this page for your records.

I agree

I do not agree

## APPENDIX C

### Recruitment Script

Dear [Name],

My name is Hillary Long and I am a doctoral student in the Organizational Leadership doctoral program at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology. For the fulfillment of my dissertation I am conducting a study regarding best practices in achieving first generation student success at higher education institutions. Your involvement with programs and initiatives centered on first generation student success was of fervent interest to me and I have carefully selected you to participate in my study. Please note that participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidentiality will be maintained to your satisfaction. Participation in the study will entail an interview which will last no more than 60 minutes. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential during and after the study. In order to minimize confidentiality risk the data gathered will be stored on a password protected computer in my place of residence for a minimum of three years. The data collected will be transcribed from the interview and coded by myself with the aid of three Pepperdine University doctoral students familiar with both qualitative research and the current study. Only myself, the student coders, and potentially, my dissertation committee will have access to the transcriptions. At the completion of the study the student coders and, if applicable, the dissertation committee will be asked to delete all materials related to this study from their devices. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Responses will be coded with a pseudonym and transcript data will be maintained separately. The audio-tapes will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. Your participation in this study is sincerely appreciated and will be invaluable to other higher education institutions striving to achieve first generation student success, as well as other scholars and practitioners in the field of higher education. If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact me at [hillary.long@pepperdine.edu](mailto:hillary.long@pepperdine.edu).

Thank you for your participation,

Hillary Long  
Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology  
Status: Doctoral Student

## APPENDIX D

### Peer Reviewer Form

Dear reviewer:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. The table below is designed to ensure that my research questions for the study are properly addressed with corresponding interview questions.

In the table below, please review each research question and the corresponding interview questions. For each interview question, consider how well the interview question addresses the research question. If the interview question is directly relevant to the research question, please mark “Keep as stated.” If the interview question is irrelevant to the research question, please mark “Delete it.” Finally, if the interview question can be modified to best fit with the research question, please suggest your modifications in the space provided. You may also recommend additional interview questions you deem necessary.

Once you have completed your analysis, please return the completed form to me via email to xxxx@pepperdine.edu. Thank you again for your participation.

### Peer Review Form

Research Question	Corresponding Interview Question
RQ1: What strategies are used by higher education institutions to increase first generation student success?	<p>IQ 1: What effective programs or resources are offered on campus that are directed at ensuring success for first generation students?</p> <p>a. The question is directly relevant to Research question - <b>Keep as stated</b></p> <p>b. The question is irrelevant to research question – <b>Delete it</b></p> <p>c. The question should be <b>modified as suggested</b>:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p> <p>_____</p>

(continued)

Research Question	Corresponding Interview Question
	<hr/> <p>IQ 2: How do you encourage students to participate in programs or resources offered on campus that are directed at ensuring first generation student success?</p> <p>a. The question is directly relevant to Research question - <b>Keep as stated</b></p> <p>b. The question is irrelevant to research question – <b>Delete it</b></p> <p>c. The question should be <b>modified as suggested:</b></p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
RQ2: What challenges are encountered by higher education institutions when striving to increase first generation student success?	<p>IQ 3: What resources do you believe are under-utilized by first generation students that would enhance their student success?</p> <p>a. The question is directly relevant to Research question - <b>Keep as stated</b></p> <p>b. The question is irrelevant to research question – <b>Delete it</b></p> <p>c. The question should be <b>modified as suggested:</b></p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p> <hr/>

(continued)

Research Question	Corresponding Interview Question
	<hr/> <hr/> <p>IQ 4: What challenges do you believe first generation students face on campus that inhibit their student success?</p> <p>a. The question is directly relevant to Research question - <b>Keep as stated</b></p> <p>b. The question is irrelevant to research question – <b>Delete it</b></p> <p>c. The question should be <b>modified as suggested:</b></p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
RQ3: How do higher education institutions define, measure and track success in implementing strategies to increase first generation student success?	<p>IQ 5: How would you define first generation student success?</p> <p>a. The question is directly relevant to Research question - <b>Keep as stated</b></p> <p>b. The question is irrelevant to research question – <b>Delete it</b></p> <p>c. The question should be <b>modified as suggested:</b></p> <hr/> <hr/> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

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Research Question	Corresponding Interview Question
	<p>IQ 6: How do you measure first generation student success? What does that look like?</p> <p>a. The question is directly relevant to Research question - <b>Keep as stated</b></p> <p>b. The question is irrelevant to research question – <b>Delete it</b></p> <p>c. The question should be <b>modified as suggested</b>:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>IQ 7: How do you track success? When do you evolve?</p> <p>a. The question is directly relevant to Research question - <b>Keep as stated</b></p> <p>b. The question is irrelevant to research question – <b>Delete it</b></p> <p>c. The question should be <b>modified as suggested</b>:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

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Research Question	Corresponding Interview Question
RQ4: What recommendations would higher education institutions provide to other institutions to improve success for future incoming first generation students?	<p>IQ 8: What recommendations do you have for higher education institutions to support first generation success?</p> <p>a. The question is directly relevant to Research question - <b>Keep as stated</b></p> <p>b. The question is irrelevant to research question – <b>Delete it</b></p> <p>c. The question should be <b>modified as suggested</b>:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>IQ 9: What mistakes have you made that you would warn other higher education institutions to avoid when building first generation student success?</p> <p>a. The question is directly relevant to Research question - <b>Keep as stated</b></p> <p>b. The question is irrelevant to research question – <b>Delete it</b></p> <p>c. The question should be <b>modified as suggested</b>:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

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Research Question	Corresponding Interview Question
	<p data-bbox="625 279 1291 315">IQ 10: Is there anything else you would like to add?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="722 363 1364 441">a. The question is directly relevant to Research question - <b>Keep as stated</b></li> <li data-bbox="722 447 1409 525">b. The question is irrelevant to research question – <b>Delete it</b></li> <li data-bbox="722 531 1412 567">c. The question should be <b>modified as suggested:</b></li> </ul> <div data-bbox="625 598 1299 651" style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 25px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div data-bbox="625 651 1299 703" style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 25px;"></div> <p data-bbox="625 699 1201 777">I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p> <div data-bbox="625 808 1299 840" style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 15px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div data-bbox="625 840 1299 871" style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 15px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div data-bbox="625 871 1299 903" style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 15px;"></div>